



Bow Street Brides

A DANGEROUS
COLLECTION I

SEDUCTION, PROPOSAL, AFFAIR, PASSION

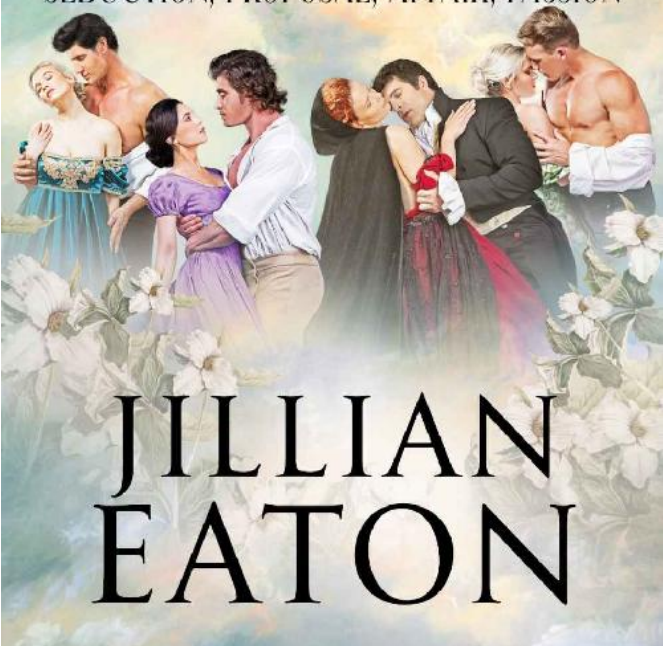


**JILLIAN
EATON**



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Featuring

A Dangerous Seduction

A Dangerous Proposal

A Dangerous Affair

A Dangerous Passion

A Note from the Author

*I hope you enjoy this collection, the first four books in my Bow Street Brides Series! Each book is and will remain for sale individually, but I thought a 4-in-1 grouping might prove helpful to some readers. This collection does **not** include A Dangerous Temptation or A Dangerous Secret (available for preorder).*

This series is a favorite of mine – there's spicy romance, adventure, danger, mystery, and (most of all) love. I hope it becomes a favorite of yours!

With warmth and gratitude,

Jillian



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exclusive excerpts, giveaways, sales, and more – right
to your inbox!*

A DANGEROUS

SEDUCTION

- *Bow Street Brides, Book 1* -

JILLIAN EATON

A MURDER....

When Lady Scarlett Sherwood's husband is killed in a riding accident that turns out to be no accident at all, she becomes the number one suspect in a murder investigation that takes the ton by storm. Her accuser? None other than the dark, ruthless Sir Owen Steel, Captain of the Bow Street Runners... and the only man Scarlett has ever loved.

A BETRAYAL...

Owen was just the poor son of a baker when Scarlett spurned him for a highborn lord. Now he is one of the most powerful men in England, but he never forgot the woman who left him humiliated and heartbroken. He always vowed he would make Scarlett pay for her treacherous betrayal, and what better way to seek revenge than to see her imprisoned for murder?

A DANGEROUS SEDUCTION...

But old passions are hard to ignore, and one kiss is all it takes for Owen and Scarlett's sizzling chemistry to be reignited. Soon they find themselves swept up in an affair that could have dangerous consequences for them both. Because there is still a murderer on the loose, and he's just found his next victim...

Scarlett.

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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

THE FIRST TIME SCARLETT MET OWEN HE WAS SELLING BREAD.

It was the very start of summer; that magical time of year when winter had finally withdrawn its icy claws, the flowers were fresh from their spring showers, and the air was sweet with the scent of honeysuckle.

On the day our story begins it was unseasonably warm, even for early summer in the sprawling Northampton countryside. As it turns out this was a very good thing, for had it *not* been warm our young heroine would not have forgotten her cloak in the carriage and she would not have had to dash back across the busy village square to fetch it. But it *was* warm and she *did* forget and as young ladies of substance and good breeding were never to be seen out in public with their arms completely bare, dash she did.

In her dashing she happened to pass a cart filled with all sorts of bread. Piled high in wicker baskets were puffy cottage loaves and flat beremeal bannocks and round saffron buns already buttered. Having quite the sweet tooth she couldn't help but stop and stare, her grumbling stomach a loud reminder that she had not eaten anything

save a poached egg at breakfast.

Ignoring her governess – for who *really* had need of a governess at sixteen? – she stepped in line behind two elderly women wearing hats so large they blocked her view of the baker.

“It will only take a few moments, Ms. Atwood,” she told the fretful woman standing beside her. “Did you see the size of the crumpets? They’re enormous!”

But when she finally reached the front of the line all thoughts of crumpets and puffy cottage loaves and flat bere meal bannocks and round saffron buns fled her mind the moment she saw the boy standing on the other side of the bread cart.

There was nothing about him that was particularly striking. Certainly nothing that warranted the sudden racing of her pulse or the hard pounding of her heart as it slammed wildly against her ribcage. But race and pound they did.

The boy was tall, but she had met taller men. He was handsome, but she’d met her fair share of those as well. And then there was the scowl to contend with. It darkened his entire face, drawing his mouth down at the corners and etching two lines across the middle of his forehead. The lines were thick and rather foreboding, but they did not intimidate her in the slightest.

Few things did.

“Hello.” Bold as you please she extended her gloved hand over a basket overflowing with apple tarts. “It is very nice to meet you. My name is Scarlett.”

Where other men would have bowed or taken her hand and kissed

the back of it, the boy merely frowned in suspicion. “What do you want?”

“Your name, to start with.” A smile brightened her entire face, revealing a charming dimple high on her right cheek. With her silky blonde hair, large gray eyes, and heart-shaped countenance, Scarlett was already promising to be a Great Beauty, just as her mother had been and her mother before her and her mother before her. Her bloodline – one that had been curated as carefully as a prized thoroughbred’s – was blessed with beautiful women and she was no exception, although sometimes she wondered if her life wouldn’t have been easier if she’d had a particularly long nose, or mousy brown hair, or (horrors upon horrors) freckles.

Maybe if she had a big ugly dark spot in the middle of her forehead she wouldn’t have felt such immense pressure to make a success of herself during her first season. For she wasn’t just expected to fill her dance card. Oh no. Lady Edgecombe’s aspirations for her daughter were much, *much* higher than that.

Scarlett was expected to do no less than procure multiple offers for her hand before the season was halfway through. The higher the title the better. Her mother already had her sights set on Lord Garrett Green, the Viscount of Hatfield. His was the first name on her handwritten list of eligible bachelors she kept tucked away inside her writing desk.

The list ran the gamut from duke to viscount – a baron was considered far too common – with little notes scribbled beside each name such as ‘due to inherit soon’ and ‘wealthy, but poor health’.

Scarlett was tempted to write little notes of her own ('boring' and 'pompous' were two that came immediately to mind) but thus far she'd resisted the urge. There were some battles that could not be won no matter how hard you fought, and this happened to be one of them. It did not matter to Lady Edgecombe what qualities Scarlett was looking for in a husband. It really did not matter that she wasn't looking for a husband at all. Her mother knew what was best and that was the end of that.

"Did you bake all of this yourself?" she asked the boy politely.

He could not have been much older than seventeen or eighteen, perhaps twenty at the most. He still had a gangly look to him, although his broad jaw and prominent nose hinted at the man he would soon become. Dark hair stuck out from beneath an old wool cap in licks and curls. His cheekbones were high and rather distinguished and his eyes were the most unusual shade of deep blue.

He looks like a wolf, Scarlett thought fancifully. Strong, wary, and just a bit feral.

"My father and I did," he said shortly. "If you're not going to buy anything you need to step aside for those who are. You're holding up the line."

Rather a lot feral.

As the daughter of a wealthy earl Scarlett was not accustomed to being spoken to in such a brash manner, but even though her governess let out a tiny squawk of protest she did not so much as bat an eye. She wasn't insulted by the boy's frankness. Quite the contrary, in fact. His candor felt like a fresh breeze in a room heavy with the

scent of cologne. Cologne that belonged to men stumbling over their own tongues trying to pay her a compliment she had done nothing to earn.

One could only have their hair compared to the bright gleam of the morning sun or their skin likened to a glowing pearl plucked from the depths of the ocean so many times before flattery began to lose its authenticity. Particularly since Scarlett knew it wasn't her appearance her suitors were complimenting.

It was her dowry.

Twenty thousand pounds to be handed over to the first man who managed to charm a ring onto her finger. It was an embarrassingly large sum and one she'd begged her father to lessen, but as usual he had refused to listen.

"My little girl will have the best husband money can buy," he'd told her time and time again. As if a husband were a pair of shoes or a necklace that one could walk into a store and purchase. Given that her mother and grandmother and great-grandmother (and so on and so forth) had been blessed with similar dowries, one had to wonder if it was really their beauty that had caught them a husband or something of a more monetary nature.

"I will be more than happy to purchase something if you tell me your name." Ignoring the sharp nudge of Ms. Atwood's foot, Scarlett reached out and gripped the edge of the wooden cart with both hands, a silent – albeit steely – indication she was not going anywhere until she got what she wanted.

What the boy did not yet know (but would quickly come to learn)

was that once she set her mind on something she refused to be deterred. One of the few good things that had come from being the only child of disinterested parents was she'd learned at an early age that if she dug her heels in deep enough she was almost always given what she wanted.

A box of velvet hair ribbons. A pretty gold locket. A new pony. And in this case, a name.

The boy's eyes narrowed until they were nothing more than thin slits of blue. "Why do you want to know? It's no business of yours."

She lifted her chin. "Why do you not want to tell me?" she countered. "A name is such a simple thing to share, and I have already given you mine." If she were pressed, Scarlett was not sure if she would be able to say *why* she was so insistent on learning the boy's name. She just knew she *had* to have it and she was willing to stand here all day if that was what it took to get it.

His gaze flicked to the line of people waiting behind Scarlett, some of which had begun to look elsewhere as their impatience grew. His bread cart might have been the most amply supplied, but it was not the only one at the market.

"Owen Steel," he muttered at last. "My name is Owen Steel."

Owen Steel.

Scarlett bit her lip as tiny shivers raced up and down the length of her spine and the fine blonde wisps of hair on the nape of her neck stood on end. She had never met Owen Steel before. Never even caught a glimpse of him, even though she'd been coming to the village square since she was a child. So why would his name have such an

effect on her? Because she found him attractive? But she'd fancied other men before and they'd never elicited such a response.

It was as though there was a string connecting them to one another. A string that had been slowly but steadily reeling itself in until it brought her and Owen together in this particular place at this particular time. If she concentrated hard enough she could almost feel it tugging deep inside of her chest. But where had the string come from? Better yet, what did it *mean*?

Scarlett gave a willful toss of her head. She may not have had any answers to the questions bouncing around inside of her head, but she was determined to find them. As determined as she'd ever been about anything in her entire life.

"My lady, we have to go," Ms. Atwood hissed. "Your mother will be waiting and wondering where we are."

"Let her wait," Scarlett said, shaking off the governess's concerns as easily and carelessly as a duck shook water from its back. It was her mother who had brought her here in the first place, and it was her mother who had insisted Scarlett wait while she flitted from one vendor to the next, filling her maid's arms with box after box of useless trinkets and shiny baubles. "I said I would make a purchase if Mr. Steel told me his name and that is precisely what I intend to do."

"About bloody time," Owen growled, earning himself a reproachful glare from Ms. Atwood.

"Please mind your tongue," the governess said primly. "You are in the presence of a lady."

"The *lady* needs to make up her mind." His gaze flicked to Scarlett.

There was bristling animosity in the depths of the cold blue, but there was also a glimmer of interest he couldn't quite manage to conceal.

Having been the recipient of many a similar stare (albeit without the animosity), Scarlett knew precisely what to do. Tilting her head ever-so-slightly to the side, she batted her lashes and adopted a coquettish smile. She may have not yet made her debut, but she was already an accomplished flirt. Her father had many friends who came to visit and lately they'd begun bringing their sons along in a (not so subtle) attempt to catch Scarlett's eye.

"What would you recommend?" she asked in the small, breathless voice that all of her suitors seemed to particularly enjoy. It was a voice she'd spent countless hours practicing, for it did not come very naturally. Left to her own devices Scarlett was a rather loud, boisterous creature. Only after months of tutelage by some of the finest governesses in all of England had she learned to contain her enthusiasm and portray herself as the calm, quiet, composed young lady everyone expected her to be.

She smiled patiently at Owen as she waited for him to be charmed, for if there was one thing that *did* come naturally it was her ability to be charming. Why, any second his dark scowl was going to turn into a bright sunny—

"Dunno," he grunted.

Scarlett blinked.

That was *it*? All of her head canting and eyelash fluttering and coy smiling and velvety voicing and all she'd gotten in response was a 'dunno'? Why, that was not even a word! This was going to be much

more difficult than she'd anticipated.

"Mr. Steel, would you care to – *bollocks*," she broke off under her breath when she heard her mother's voice slice through the crowd with all the sharpness of a knife.

"Lady Scarlett," her governess scolded, "that is not a word–"

"Young ladies use. Yes, yes I know. Do you think she's seen us?" It was not often Lady Edgecombe spoke above a measured whisper. For her to come so dangerously close to a shout – and in such an open place as this – meant she was very, very displeased.

Hunching her shoulders, Scarlett cast a furtive glance to the right and then to the left. When she saw a plumed peacock feather bobbing and weaving its way straight towards the bread cart she bit back a groan. They'd been spotted, then. Which meant her time with Owen was coming precariously close to an end. If only there was some way to ensure their paths would cross again!

Her breath caught as an idea popped into her head.

Maybe there was...

"Scarlett! *There* you are." Parting the crowd with a haughty stare, Lady Edgecombe marched straight to the front of the line and regarded her only child with pinched lips and a raised brow.

Elegantly striking, Scarlett's mother was the epitome of a finely bred lady. Despite her age of two and forty, her hair did not yet have a hint of gray and there was nary a dark spot to be found upon her ivory countenance. Oh, there may have been a few more lines around the edges of her eyes and mouth than there used to be, but she hid them with various powders and kept them from growing by never

smiling any more than was absolutely necessary. Wealth and good breeding showed itself in every inch of her slender frame, from the confident tilt of her feathered hat to the enormous sapphire and gold ring on her right index finger; a family heirloom that would pass to Scarlett on the day of her wedding.

Sunlight reflected off the ring as Lady Edgecombe raised her hand and tucked a loose tendril back up underneath her daughter's bonnet.

Mustn't have a single hair out of place, Scarlett thought with a twinge of annoyance that she hid behind a pleasant smile. *Heaven forbid I ever look less than perfect.*

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting, Mother. I got distracted."

"Again?" Lady Edgecombe was far too well-mannered to throw her hands up in the air but the clipped edge in her voice betrayed how exasperated she was. "And here I thought I was *quite* clear with my orders. You were to go to the carriage to retrieve your cloak and come straight back." Her sharp gaze flicked to Scarlett's governess who had the good grace to blush and look down at her feet. "Instead I found myself waiting for a distastefully long amount of time. Do you care to explain yourself, Ms. Atwood?"

"It wasn't her fault," Scarlett said hurriedly, not wanting her mother to blame her governess for their delay when *she* had been the one who insisted they stop at the bread cart. "I – I wanted some scones and the line was very long."

For the first time Lady Edgecombe seemed to realize where she was standing. She looked at Owen, who was watching their exchange with the faintest of smirks, and then back at Scarlett. The corners of her

mouth tightened imperceptibly. Not quite enough to cause a wrinkle, but certainly enough to show her displeasure. “We have a perfectly capable cook at home, my dear. Come along now. We are late as it is.”

But Scarlett refused to move. “I wanted to order the scones for Father’s birthday as a surprise.”

“Need I repeat myself? We have a perfectly capable cook at—”

“Yes,” Scarlett interrupted, “but Father will surely smell them baking and the surprise will be ruined.”

“Of all the outlandish—” Lady Edgecombe cut herself off, nostrils flaring as she took a deep breath. “Very well. Order your scones, but be quick about it.”

Scarlett turned to Owen. “We will take three dozen of your blueberry scones, please.”

“Three *dozen*?” Lady Edgecombe exclaimed before Owen could respond. “What on earth is your father going to do with three *dozen* blueberry scones?”

“Eat them.”

Lady Edgecombe held her daughter’s gaze for three very long seconds before she gave the tiniest of nods. Like Scarlett, she knew when to pick her battles. “Fine. Three dozen blueberry scones, and be sharp about it. We haven’t all day.”

Owen’s jaw hardened and for a moment Scarlett was afraid he was going to turn them away but with a shrug he said, “I don’t have that many.”

“Well then how many *do* you have?”

He did a quick count. “Four.”

“Then four shall have to suffice. Ms. Atwood, please see to it that the scones are—”

“Wait!” Scarlett cried.

Lady Edgecombe pressed her lips together so hard a pale green vein bulged high on her forehead. “There are people waiting,” she hissed, “and they are beginning to stare. Come *along*, Scarlett.”

Scarlett knew there was nothing her mother hated worse than staring. In fact, she had been counting on it. Just as she’d been counting on the fact that Owen would not have three dozen scones at his disposal.

“Why not have the scones delivered right to the house? That way they will be freshly baked. You can do that, can’t you?” she asked Owen, biting back a triumphant smile as all of the pieces of the puzzle she’d so hastily put together fell neatly into place. “Tuesday morning should work brilliantly.” Especially since both of her parents were going to be attending a play in London.

Owen rubbed his chin. “I suppose so. Delivery’s going to be extra, though.”

“Price is of no issue,” Lady Edgecombe snapped before she looked pointedly at her daughter. “Are you happy now, darling?”

Was she happy that she’d be able to see Owen again without anyone – with the exception of Ms. Atwood, who really did not count – being the wiser?

“Exceedingly so.”

“How wonderful. Can we leave now, or would you like to stop at the florist and purchase ten dozen white roses?”

“No,” Scarlett said cheerfully, ignoring her mother’s biting sarcasm.
“The scones should do it.”

If either Lady Edgecombe or Ms. Atwood noted the extra bounce that accompanied her step on the way back to the carriage they did not mention it, and before Scarlett had even settled into her seat she was already counting down the days until she would see Owen again...

CHAPTER ONE

I never should have married him.

Clutching the windowsill so hard her knuckles were leached of color in the dim morning light, Lady Scarlett Sherwood watched in bitter silence as her husband rode away, the clatter of his horse's hooves echoing loudly on the cobblestones.

He was going to wake the neighbors, but what did he care? The only person Rodger cared for was himself. If there was one thing Scarlett knew to be true after seven long years of marriage it was that.

Seven years...

Her eyes closed as a shudder went down her spine. How had so much time passed? Some days it felt like only yesterday she'd stood beside him in church and smiled like a fool while they were bound together before King and Country; others dragged by so slowly she was certain she'd fallen straight into hell. And no matter how hard she clawed and kicked and fought she couldn't climb back out again.

Seven years of marriage and her hate for her husband grew more and more every day. It bubbled up inside of her like a living, breathing thing, twisting and twining its way through her stomach and her heart and her lungs until it pained her to eat, to smile, to

breathe.

How long had it been since she'd drawn a full, contented breath?

She could not remember.

"My lady, would you care for some tea?"

Scarlett turned at the familiar sound of her maid's voice. Round faced and quiet spoken with plain brown hair and kind eyes, Ruth had been working in the kitchen when Scarlett took over the Sherwood household. Having not brought a lady's maid with her, she chose Ruth to fill the coveted position and the two women had quickly become confidants. No one except for Ruth knew the full extent of her misery, for only a trusted servant was privy to all of the moments one wished to hide from the outside world.

Like the night she cried herself sick after discovering Rodger was carrying on with one of her best friends. Or the bruises he left on her wrist after he drank too much. Or the screaming matches that shook the rafters of their brick townhouse nearly every evening.

"Does it have a dash of brandy in it?" Turning away from the window, Scarlett gathered her shawl more snugly around her shoulders and padded barefoot across her bedchamber. A fire crackled in the hearth, chasing away the chill brought on by yet another cold frosty morning. Spring may have been right around the corner, but after four long months of snow and sleet and freezing rain it felt as though winter had been upon them for an eternity.

Not unlike her marriage.

"No brandy, but it does have a dash of honey." Steam spiraled up from the cup of tea that Ruth held out. "Did you and Lord Sherwood

have another disagreement?”

Scarlett lifted a wry brow. “We both know you heard us yelling, Ruth. No need to pretend otherwise.” Wrapping both of her hands around the white porcelain cup to warm them, she blew across the top before taking a sip. The exotic taste of jasmine flooded her mouth, followed by a sharp hint of ginger.

She had always preferred her tea as she preferred her men: strong, full flavored, and just a little mysterious. Three traits she’d thought Rodger possessed in spades when she first met him. How dashing he’d seemed when she spied him across the ballroom all those years ago! With his sparkling green eyes and wavy blond hair and charismatic smile he had looked like a hero torn straight from the pages of a fairytale. Little did she know he would turn out to be the villain. Perhaps if she had listened to her heart... but she’d been too young, too impulsive, and too bloody stubborn to see Rodger for who he truly was.

And now I am paying the price, she thought silently as she carried her tea over to a velvet stool and sat down facing a large oval looking glass framed in gold leaf. Her reflection stared back at her: a willowy thin woman with high cheekbones that were just a little too gaunt and ivory skin that was just a little too pale.

As she examined her countenance with a critical eye Scarlett was reminded that Rodger wasn’t the only one who had changed over the course of their marriage. There was a frailty to her appearance that hadn’t been there before. Gone was the spoiled young heiress who did not have a care in the world. In her place was a woman full grown

who knew the deep, dark pain of living beneath the heavy shadow of regret.

If only she had picked Owen...

No, she thought sharply. Her hands involuntarily trembled, nearly spilling tea down the front of her dressing gown. Setting the cup aside, she forced herself to take a long, measured breath. She would not think of him.

Especially not on today of all days.

"I was thinking something simple," she told Ruth as the maid gently began to untangle her hair with a fine-toothed ivory comb. Long and thick and heavy, Scarlett's hair tumbled all the way down to her waist in a shimmering wave of spun gold. It was beautiful, but like all beautiful things it was not without its burdens, the most costly of which was the time it took to brush and twist and pin it into place every single blessed morning.

How many hours had she sat on this very stool staring at herself while Ruth fashioned curls and coiffures and chignons?

Too many too count, she decided abruptly.

"Ruth, I have changed my mind."

Their gazes met in the mirror's silvery reflection as the maid looked up.

"You would like something more elaborate?" she asked.

"No," Scarlett said with a small, determined shake of her head. "I want you to cut it."

"Cut what, my lady? Not your *hair*," she said, her eyes widening with alarm when Scarlett remained silent. "Oh, you cannot do that!"

“It is my hair. I can do whatever I please with it.”

Ruth’s hands fluttered with distress as she set the comb down on the vanity table with a sharp *click*. “But Lord Sherwood has often expressed how much he loves your hair. I wouldn’t dare touch it, my lady.”

Scarlett barely managed to contain a snort. Rodger did not love anyone or anything except for himself. He fancied her hair because he thought it made her look beautiful, and he was a man who liked to surround himself with beautiful things. In that regard she was no more important to him than his prized horse or his favorite jacket or the hideously ornate gold chandelier he had insisted on hanging in the middle of the foyer. “All the more reason to cut it off. There are shears in the top drawer of my dresser. If you do not get them, I will.”

“But my lady—”

“I will not force you to do something you do not want to do, Ruth. But know that I will see it done either way. I am weary of spending half of my morning sitting in front of a mirror. Surely you have grown just as weary standing behind it.”

They had known each other for too long and been through too much for Ruth to lie.

“I must admit it does, at times, get rather tiresome,” she admitted in a small voice.

“There, you see?” The dimple on Scarlett’s right cheek made a rare appearance as she smiled up at her maid’s reflection. “The shears, if you would.”

With obvious reluctance Ruth removed the silver shears from the

dresser, but when it came time to make the first cut she hesitated.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like to reconsider?”

Scarlett’s head canted to the side as she met her own gaze in the mirror. She knew she was being impulsive and just a tad dramatic, but she needed *something* to distract her from the decision she’d made seven years ago. The one that had her sitting here, on this red velvet stool, in this enormous townhouse with its ugly gold chandelier, instead of a little cottage in the country. A cottage that would have been too small and too plain but oh, it would have been filled with so much love.

“No,” she said, drawing her shoulders back. “Cut it off. Cut it all off.”

“WHAT THE DEVIL DID YOU DO TO YOUR HAIR?” Rodger’s roar echoed through the entire parlor and most of the downstairs. A maid carrying clean linens visibly flinched and went scurrying off in the opposite direction. Scarlett did not even bother to look up from her needlework.

“I thought that would be rather obvious,” she said mildly.

Her husband’s boots left smears of dirt on the rug as he stormed into the parlor. Snatching the embroidery hoop right off her lap he threw it into the fireplace. “Look at me when I am speaking to you,” he snarled, spittle flying from the corners of his mouth.

Scarlett lifted her head ever-so-slowly. She’d anticipated Rodger would pitch a fit the moment he saw her which was why she’d positioned herself in the one room he had to pass on the way to his

study. She was ready for a good fight. More than that, she *wanted* it. Anything to distract herself from the traitorous direction of her thoughts.

She just wished she'd had the foresight to put down her needlework first.

"Yes dear? Is there something I can help you with?" Once upon a time the mere sight of Rodger would have filled her belly with butterflies. Now as her gaze moved dispassionately across his bloated, blotchy face she felt nothing but a mild twinge of disgust.

The years had not been kind to her husband. Courtesy of his penchant for drinking to excess nearly every night his green eyes were permanently bloodshot and his belly bulged over the waistband of his trousers. His hair was beginning to thin and his neck pushed against the collar of his waistcoat. The dashing lord she'd convinced herself she was in love with had almost vanished completely. In his place was a dissolute cad with too many vices and a body that was as ugly as his temper.

Looking at the vein bulging in her husband's forehead Scarlett could not help but wonder, as she often did despite the pain it brought her, how Owen had changed since she'd last seen him. In her mind he was still the tall, gangly boy with a shock of unruly black hair sticking out from beneath his wool cap. He would be almost thirty by now. A man fully grown.

Was he still selling bread in the same village where they'd met?

Did he have a wife? Children?

Was he happy?

She hoped so. He deserved all the happiness in the world while she... well, she deserved precisely what she'd gotten: a fancy house and a loveless marriage.

"I asked you a question," Rodger growled.

Scarlett rose out of her chair in a swirl of blue skirts. She wasn't afraid to stand up to her husband. She never had been, which was one of the reasons Rodger despised her so much. If she'd been demure and obedient and curtailed to his demands as a good wife should they might have had some semblance of a peaceful marriage instead of the bitter war they were constantly engaged in.

"And I gave you an answer." Her newly shorn curls bounced from one shoulder to the other as she tilted her head. In the end she hadn't had the heart to cut *all* of her hair off, but it was considerably shorter than it had been, stopping just shy of her collarbone. On some women the shorter style would have been atrocious. Scarlett liked to think it made her look like a pixie.

"You look like a boy." Rodger's bloodshot eyes flashed with pure malice as he took a menacing step towards her. "What the bloody hell were you thinking?"

Scarlett's narrow shoulders lifted and fell in a graceful shrug. "I wanted something different. I was not aware your permission was required."

When he grabbed her wrist and squeezed it took all the strength she possessed not to flinch. Yanking her forward so quickly that she stumbled, he grabbed a fistful of her hair and gave it a derisive pull. "You did this on purpose to anger me."

“Do not be silly,” she said, even though that was precisely why she’d done it. Anything to get under his skin. “I did it for myself and no one else. Now let me go, or have you forgotten we are expected at the Manheim’s tonight?” She looked deliberately down at his hand which was still wrapped tightly around her wrist. “I am afraid bruises are not at all in style, you know. People will talk.”

Rodger had the good grace to flush before he dropped her arm and stepped back. If there was one thing more important to him than money, it was preserving his reputation as a man who had everything: a title, a fortune, a fashionable townhouse, an elegant manor, and (most importantly) a gorgeous wife that made him the envy of every other man he knew.

Despite their loathing of one another Scarlett and Rodger were regarded as one of the *ton*’s premiere couples: a lauded example of marrying within one’s class. She often wondered what their friends would think if they saw how she and Rodger acted behind closed doors. Would they be appalled? Repulsed? Or would they carry on acting as if nothing were amiss? She had an inkling it would be the latter.

“I did not mean to squeeze so hard,” Rodger said, scowling at his wife though it were *her* fault he had grabbed her arm in such a forceful manner.

“No,” Scarlett murmured as she rubbed sensation back into her wrist. “You never do.”

They stared at one another for several long seconds while the fire crackled and hissed and filled the parlor with a warm, merry glow

that did little to thaw the ice between them.

“You still compare me to him, don’t you?” he asked suddenly. “I can see it in your eyes when you look at me. Even after all these years you wish you had picked him instead of me.”

Every vertebrae in Scarlett’s spine stiffened. There were many things she tolerated when it came to Rodger. His constant parade of mistresses. His excessive drinking. Even his verbal and physical abuse. But the one thing she had never allowed – the one thing she could *not* allow – was any mention of the boy she had loved and ultimately betrayed. It was too painful. More painful than a scathing insult. More painful than a blustery shout. More painful than a bruised wrist.

“I am certain I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Oh yes you do. What was the little beggar’s name? That’s right,” he sneered before she could muster a response. “Steel. Owen Steel.”

Even the sound of his name was enough to send a blade stabbing straight into her heart. Particularly when it came from the mouth of the one man who had no right to speak it.

“Leave him alone,” she hissed as her eyes flashed a dark, ominous gray. “You were the one I chose and you were the one I married, God help me. There is no need to bring up the past.”

“Why ever not?” It wasn’t often that Rodger managed to get beneath his wife’s skin and she could tell by the vindictive gleam in his eyes that he wasn’t going to pull out his knife until he’d drawn blood. “I knew you fancied him, of course. But I never thought you actually *loved* the poor bastard.”

Scarlett drew in a sharp breath.

“Do not speak another word,” she warned.

“The rich earl’s daughter and the poor baker’s son.” Shadows spun from the fire danced Rodger’s face as he threw back his head and laughed. “Can you imagine what people would have said if you had actually run away with him?”

“This conversation is over.” But when she tried to walk past him Rodger’s hand shot out and grabbed her chin in a bruising grip.

“Not yet.” His breath reeked of brandy as it fanned across her face. “Tell me, would you really had done it? Eloped to Gretna Green and become the wife of a baker?” He made a *tsking* sound under his breath. “You know as well as I that you never would have been suited for such a life.”

“Are you quite finished?” Despite the frantic pounding of her heart her voice was level and even and a bit bored. “I should change before we leave for the Manheim’s. This dress is too simple for a dinner party.”

His gaze flicked down her body, lingering on the swell of her breasts before returning to her face. “Yes, go make yourself presentable. Devil knows it’s the one thing you are actually good at. And do something with your hair,” he added before he released her chin and stepped back. “It’s bloody hideous.”

Resisting the urge to spit in his face – barely – she offered a thin smile instead. “Anything else, my dear? You know how I so love to please you.”

He gave her a withering glance. “You haven’t pleased me in years.”

Scarlett watched him as he left the parlor and waited until his

footsteps had receded down the hall before she allowed herself to sit down in front of the fire. Hugging her legs to her chest as a young child might, she rested her head on her knees, closed her eyes, and wept.

CHAPTER TWO

ON THE SHORT CARRIAGE RIDE over to Lord and Lady Manheim's the Sherwood's were wrapped in warm cloaks and cold silence.

Scarlett did not look at Rodger. Rodger did not look at Scarlett. They were together but separate; two bodies occupying the same space while their minds wandered elsewhere. Scarlett had no idea what wayward thoughts were occupying her husband's head. His expression was unusually pensive, his stony gaze directed out the window at the passing townhouses. She sat across from him looking in the opposite direction, a faint line marring her brow as she tried her hardest not to think of Owen.

Despite her best efforts he had been on her mind all day; sneaking in through cracks and crevices like light spilling into a dark forest. It still hurt to think of him. Even after so much time, it still hurt. Which was why she usually kept all of their memories tucked neatly away inside a box and the box tied tight with a ribbon. But the ends of the ribbon were beginning to fray and Scarlett knew better than anyone that once a ribbon began to unravel there was no fixing it. The best she could hope for was a distraction and the Manheim's dinner party

provided the perfect opportunity to do just that.

In preparation for an evening of light gossip and lively conversation she had changed into a gown of pale green with pink stripes running down the snug bodice and voluminous bell skirt. It was a little too fancy for a quiet dinner party, but no one would expect anything less of her. She was, after all, the woman all of the other women looked to when they were trying to discover the next *tendance del la mode*.

No matter what Scarlett wore she would always see it replicated in some form or another at the next social function she attended. Every once in a while she toyed with wearing something completely outlandish – bright orange slippers, green gloves, a bird on her head instead of a hat – just to see what would happen, but thus far she had managed to resist the urge.

“We’re here.” Rodger spoke without looking at her.

Giving her hat a quick pat to ensure it was still properly in place, Scarlett gathered her skirts and followed her husband out of the carriage. In front of them other guests were alighting from their conveyances as well. If she squinted Scarlett could just make out the familiar silhouette of Lord Livingston, a rather portly earl whose waistband was exceeded only by his ego.

“Be careful darling,” Rodger said once she had both feet on the ground. “It is quite slippery. I would not want you to have an untimely fall.”

“No,” she said sweetly as she tucked her gloved hand inside the crook of his elbow. “We wouldn’t want that.”

And so their act began.

They'd decided long ago it would be in both of their best interests to avoid gossip and pretend they were happy in public, then do what they wished in private. For Rodger it meant spending his nights with his mistress, and for Scarlett it meant spending her nights without Rodger.

She could not remember the last time he had touched her in an intimate manner... Four years? Five? They had kept separate bed chambers from the very beginning, but he used to visit her at least once per week.

At first their relations had not been horrible. Certainly they had never been very *good*, but then she'd been warned by her mother to not expect anything spectacular.

'Lay there quietly and let your husband do what he will' Lady Edgecombe had advised on the eve of Scarlett's wedding, the corners of her eyes pinching together like they always did when she was discussing a subject she found particularly distasteful.

For the first few months Scarlett had heeded her mother's words. Until the night Rodger came staggering into her bedchamber foxed to the high heavens. He had taken her roughly and without compassion, thrusting into her squirming body long after she had pleaded with him to stop. After that she'd begun locking her door and admitting him only once she was convinced of his sobriety, which was not very often.

Gradually his visits had begun to dwindle until they'd subsided all together. Part of her had known he'd taken a mistress – Rodger was not a man to deny himself pleasure – but she'd never imagined that

mistress would end up being her dearest friend Felicity Ashburn.

Rodger's betrayal had been expected. But Felicity's...

To this day it still hurt her to think about it. She and Felicity had been friends since childhood. More than friends, they'd been sisters. They had shared everything from secrets to clothes, but she had never thought in a million years they would share the same husband.

What made the pain all the worse was that Felicity had *known* how badly she and Rodger were struggling... and she'd taken advantage in the most callous way possible.

Scarlett knew at some point Rodger would have to start knocking on her bedchamber door again. His mistresses may have brought him pleasure, but only his wife could give him an heir. And even though she would prefer he not be the father, she wanted a child.

Maybe when she had a tiny babe at her breast she would finally find some semblance of happiness. She could retire to their country estate in Surrey, far away from the ostentatiousness of the *ton* that she'd once found so appealing. Far away from the glittering balls and the fancy dinner parties. Far away from the catty gossip of women and the lascivious stares of men. Far away from everything she used to think she wanted... but never truly needed. For the only thing she needed – the only thing that *really* mattered – had been squandered away a long time ago.

And the irony of it still stung to this day.

She and Rodger were greeted in the foyer by the Manheim's butler, a rather stern-faced man who took their cloaks and hats and directed them into the receiving parlor where some of the other guests had

already gathered.

For the first part of the evening Rodger stayed right by his wife's side, the perfect picture of a doting husband. He fetched her a glass of elderberry wine. She laughed lightly at his jokes. They gazed lovingly at one another. No one watching would ever guess the secret loathing hidden behind their calculated smiles.

When it came time for dinner to be served everyone was ushered into the dining room where a long table covered in ivory linens and gold filigreed chinaware was set for eight. Scarlett found herself sitting to the left of their hostess while Rodger was placed at the far end of the table beside their host. She was glad they were sitting so far apart for there were only so many times she could stomach looking up at him with a warm smile.

"You simply *must* tell me who your seamstress is." Lady Manheim's high-pitched voice cut through the dark fog of Scarlett's thoughts. "That color combination is simply to die for. Whoever would have thought of pink and green? Genius," she declared. "Positively genius."

Scarlett smiled demurely at her hostess. A slender brunette who would have been quite pretty save for her protruding front teeth and that atrocious voice, Lady Eleanor Manheim had recently risen through the ranks of London's *beau monde* by marrying an earl of considerable wealth. She was Lord Manheim's second wife (his first had died tragically in childbirth) and she was far more ruthless and self-serving than the first Lady Manheim had been.

Suffice it to say Scarlett did not like her – truth be told she was not overly fond of anyone sitting at the table – but she played along for

what was high society but one large, intricate game? A game where it was always better to be the cat than the mouse.

Courtesy of her sharp wit, elegant beauty, and renowned fashion Scarlett was regarded as one of the *ton's* Originals; a title she had earned during her debut nearly a decade ago. Over the years she had managed to retain the coveted moniker through hard work, sheer will, and a bit of dumb luck. It was not easy being an Original, but it was far better than *not* being an Original.

Or so she kept telling herself.

“Now you know I cannot reveal their name.” The identity of the person who created Scarlett’s dresses and gowns was one of the best kept secrets in the entire *ton*. Everyone wanted to know who she – or he – was. Because it amused her to do so, she kept it a secret. The only one who knew was Ruth and she would never dream of telling anyone. Not when her loyalty to Scarlett was absolute. “But I shall make sure to extend your compliments. They will be quite pleased.”

The quick flash of irritation in Eleanor’s brown gaze was almost instantly replaced with a smile so sweet it made Scarlett want to grind her teeth. “You will have to tell me soon, for we are going to be the *best* of friends.”

“Are we?” Scarlett said lightly. Only a close acquaintance would recognize the sarcastic undertone in her voice. Unfortunately for Eleanor, she did not know Scarlett nearly as well as she was pretending to for the benefit of her guests.

“Oh yes.” Lord Manheim’s wife spoke with the utmost confidence. “I can feel it. Can’t you?”

The only thing Scarlett *felt* was hungry. So far just two of the traditional four courses had been carried out and they'd consisted of nothing more than a small bowl of turtle soup and a plate filled with an assortment of bitter greens.

Thankfully, after only a few more minutes of idle discussion centered around one of Eleanor's new gowns, the main course was finally served. It consisted of roasted partridge, lamb cutlets drizzled in balsamic sauce, sweetbread au jus (one of Scarlett's personal favorites), and peas soaked in heavy cream.

She ate everything on her plate and were it socially acceptable she would have asked for seconds. Scarlett may have been tiny in stature, but she'd always possessed a ravenous appetite. Her father used to jest that it was a good thing he was an earl or else she surely would have eaten them out of house and home.

After dessert – miniature chocolate cakes decorated in gold foil and topped with strawberries – the men retired to the study for brandy and cigars while the women retreated into the drawing room for gossip and a game of whist.

Sipping from a glass of dark red claret, Scarlett studied her cards with a critical eye. Her naturally competitive nature did not take very kindly to losing. So far her team – consisting of herself and Lord Livingston's wife, a shy girl twelve years his junior – was winning handily by seven points. A rather easy feat given that no one else was playing whist to win; they were playing whist to gossip.

“Did you hear that Lord Buxton has taken *another* mistress?” Eleanor said with an arched brow.

“But he has been with the Widow Granville for nearly five years.” This came from Lady Prudence, one of Eleanor’s closest friends. They had made their debut together – three years after Scarlett – and had both managed to catch a husband during their first season; no small feat given the number of debutantes that descended upon London every year like a flock of birds.

“I *know*. It is quite the scandal. Everyone’s talking about it.”

Scarlett managed – barely – not to roll her eyes. Once upon a time she would have eagerly added to the gossip, but recently she’d found that dragging another’s name through the mud held little appeal.

“Whose draw is it?” she asked, attempting to lure the women’s attention back to the game at hand.

They were having none of it.

“I wonder if he will go back to her,” Prudence mused after only the most cursory of glances at her cards. “The Widow Granville, that is. Although I suppose she *is* getting rather old. Do you think that is why Lord Buxton shifted his interest elsewhere?”

Eleanor laid her cards face down on the table and leaned back in her chair, a thoughtful expression on her face. “I suppose. No man wants a mistress who is over the hill. I am sure she will land on her feet, however. Her kind always does.”

The irony, of course, was that the husband of every single woman sitting around the table kept a mistress of their own.

Including Eleanor’s.

She knew it. Scarlett knew it. Prudence knew it. Even Francis Livingston knew it and she was barely out of the schoolroom. It was

both a universally accepted and ignored truth that one's husband was not expected to be faithful.

Wealthy, yes. Titled, but of course. Handsome, if one was lucky. But loyal?

No.

Not that.

Suddenly Eleanor's gaze flicked over Scarlett's left shoulder. Her mouth curving in a catlike smile – the sort of smile a cat wore right before it devoured the proverbial canary – she cried out, “Lady Ashburn! I was wondering when you would join us. Please, have a seat.”

What name did she say?

The cards Scarlett had been so carefully guarding spilled onto the floor as she spun around in her seat. When she saw who was standing silhouetted in the doorway all of the blood rushed from her face, leaving her cheeks as pale as the white lilies sitting in a glass vase on the windowsill.

“Good evening,” Felicity said softly. “I am sorry I am so very late. Our horse lost his shoe on the way over and we were forced to stop.”

While Prudence and Francis chirped their greetings, Scarlett only stared. More than a year had passed since the last time she'd seen Felicity, but her friend – or rather, her *ex*-friend – looked exactly as she remembered.

Dark brown hair swept up in a neat chignon. High cheekbones and a narrow chin. Violet eyes that were tilted slightly in the corners. Was it any wonder Rodger had wanted her for his bed? He was only a man,

after all, and one whose morals were so low as to be completely nonexistent. Scarlett had expected it of him. But she had never expected, never even *dreamed*, that Felicity would be capable of plunging a knife into her back right above her husband's.

Wrenching her gaze away from Felicity, she met Eleanor's smug stare across the table. "A word," she bit out between her teeth before she stood up, grabbed Eleanor's arm, and more or less dragged her across the drawing room to the fireplace.

"You did this on purpose," she accused the second they were out of earshot. Her eyes flashed a dangerous shade of gray in the dancing light, betraying the fury that bubbled beneath her skin like lava smoldering within the dark, deep depths of a volcano.

Eleanor did not bother to deny it.

"I did," she said with a haughty toss of her head.

The snap and crackle of burning logs muffled their voices, but Scarlett could feel the heavy weight of four pairs of eyes watching their every movement. Her hands curled into tiny fists and the muscles in her back knotted as she struggled to contain her anger. She didn't need to ask Eleanor why she had invited Felicity tonight. The answer was so painfully obvious and so beneath a woman of Eleanor's station that it made her wonder what the devil Lord Manheim had ever seen in the woman to make him like her enough to propose marriage.

"You shouldn't have." It was well known that since their falling out Scarlett and Felicity had gone to great lengths to avoid being trapped on the same estate together, let alone caught in the same room. The

last time they'd inadvertently crossed paths they had nearly come to blows and probably would have if their respective husbands had not been there to separate them. Something Eleanor surely knew, and why she had made certain both of their names were on her invitation list.

What should have been a quiet game of whist was now an Event that would be talked about for days – if not weeks – to come. And while most of the gossip would surround Scarlett and Felicity, some of it would spill over to include Eleanor, making certain she'd have people clambering over themselves to attend her next dinner party.

It was an utterly selfish thing to do. It was also quite cunning, making Scarlett realize she had done herself a disservice by underestimating the lengths to which Eleanor would go to secure herself a higher rung on the social ladder.

“Lady Ashburn and I met at Hyde Park just the other day.” Eleanor’s head canted to the side as her mouth twisted into a knowing smirk. “She is so very lovely and kind. It would have been quite rude of me not to invite her. I do realize there is a bit of a history between the two of you, but surely it is high time to let bygones be bygones. Do you not concur, Lady Sherwood?”

The only thing Scarlett *concurred* was that Eleanor deserved to have that horrible smirk slapped right off her face. While doing so would have been immensely satisfying, it would have also given Eleanor precisely what she wanted: a scandal.

The best thing Scarlett could do – the *only* thing she could do – was temper her emotions and pretend, just for one evening, that she did not loathe the very air Felicity breathed.

Her eyes closed as she took a second to gather her thoughts, pale lashes spilling across cheeks that were flushed bright pink. She was so very weary of pretending. It seemed as though that was all she did anymore.

Pretend she was happy.

Pretend she loved Rodger.

Pretend she had forgotten about Owen.

How much pretending could one person do before they cracked like the cornerstone of the Wellesley Church had last winter after a bad storm?

She supposed she was about to find out.

CHAPTER THREE

“Felicity, what are you doing here?”

That was what Scarlett had asked her friend when she’d entered her foyer that fateful day six years ago and saw Felicity creeping down the staircase. Her dark brown hair, usually so neatly tended, had been in disarray around her flushed cheeks and her pelisse had been slightly askew as if she’d put it on in a great hurry.

Having just returned from her daily morning ride, Scarlett remembered being puzzled by Felicity’s presence in her home at such an early hour. That puzzlement had quickly shifted to awareness and awareness to bewildered hurt when Rodger appeared at the top of the staircase, his shirt unbuttoned and a silk stocking dangling from his hand.

“Felicity you forgot your – Scarlett.” Because they’d been less than a year into their marriage he’d actually had the good grace to look ashamed. “I did not expect you to return from your ride so soon.”

Scarlett’s gaze had darted from her friend to her husband and back again. Feeling as though she’d been struck square in the gut she stumbled back a step, her eyes filling with tears of shocked disbelief.

“What... what are you doing here, Felicity?” she’d repeated,

wishing – praying – her friend would give her an answer that explained away her swollen lips and guilty expression and the damned silk stocking Rodger was still holding. A silk stocking Scarlett knew for a fact did not belong to her, as all of her stockings were white and this one was pale blue.

The same pale blue peeking out from beneath the hem of Felicity's skirts.

"I... I do not know what to say." Felicity looked absolutely miserable but not nearly as miserable as Scarlett felt.

"How long," she had managed to choke out past the burning lump of coal in the middle of her throat. She'd begun to suspect Rodger had been stepping out as of late. In addition to spending more time in London, he had stopped coming to her bedroom as frequently. But she had assumed his mistress – if he did indeed have one – was someone of no consequence. A passing fancy. A fly by night, such as it were. And while she would rather he remain faithful, she knew husbands rarely were. She'd just never imagined his mistress would be one of her oldest, dearest friends! Hurt flooded her gaze as she glared up at Felicity through a thin veil of tears. "How long has – has this been going on?"

"Scarlett, please let me explain." Her eyes as big as two silver shillings, Felicity hurried down the rest of the steps and tried to reach for Scarlett's arm but she snatched it away, repulsed at the idea of being touched by the same hand that had just been touching her husband.

"I asked you a question. How long? A month? Two months?

Longer? Tell me!" she demanded when Felicity remained silent.

"You do not understand—"

"Three weeks, give or take," Rodger called down from the top of the stairs. Mercifully he'd hidden the stocking from view. It was a small comfort given everything Scarlett had just discovered, but at least she wouldn't have to stare at it any longer. "I am sorry you had to find out this way, my dear. It was never my intention."

Scarlett's gaze darted back and forth between them. Her husband. The woman she'd considered a sister. Her husband. Her sister. "No," she said slowly, "I am sure your intention was to never be caught. How unfortunate for you that I came home before you had a chance to cover up your indiscretion."

"Please," Felicity begged, bringing her hands together beneath her chin. Tears fell freely from her eyes, dampening her cheeks and staining the collar of her pelisse. "If you would only let me explain—"

"Explain?" Scarlett said scathingly. "I am not blind, Felicity. I do not need you to *explain* anything."

"But—"

"*Get out*," she hissed. "I never want to see you ever again."

Felicity jerked back as though she'd been struck.

"Surely you do not mean that," she whispered. "I will come back tomorrow after you have had time to calm yourself. Yes. Yes, that is precisely what I shall do. Then we can sit down and discuss—"

"How you have turned yourself into my husband's whore?" Scarlett's bitter laugh echoed through the foyer. "I think not. There is nothing left for us to *discuss*." She could not decide which hurt worse.

Her husband's betrayal or Felicity's. At least Rodger knew better than to make sad, pitiful excuses. In fact, he had disappeared from the top of the staircase altogether. Her jaw hardened, teeth clenching to the point of pain. She would deal with him later.

"Am I somehow making myself unclear?" she demanded when Felicity remained frozen in place as though her shoes had somehow adhered themselves to the floor. "I want you to leave and never return!"

It was easier to be angry. Easier to shout instead of cry. Easier to stand on top of fury than it was to drown inside of sorrow. Easier to see things in black and white than shades of gray.

Part of her knew there was more to story than what met the eye, but she didn't want to hear it.

Not now when she was still reeling from the shock of Felicity's deception.

Perhaps not ever.

"If you do not leave of your own accord I shall have Givens escort you off the property." Her gaze flicked past Felicity to where their butler stood silently in front of the drawing room, his face carefully devoid of expression. Absently she wondered if he'd known of the affair, and decided that he had. There was not much that escaped a butler's notice. But Givens was loyal to Rodger – along with the rest of the household staff with the exception of Ruth – and he would have had no reason to tell Scarlett of his master's indiscretion.

She closed her eyes as a shudder racked her body. To imagine Rodger and Felicity in bed together, their limbs entwined, their

mouths touching... Her eyes snapped open. No. She wouldn't imagine it. She *couldn't*.

"Givens, please come here and--"

"There is no need for that. I shall see myself out." Shaking her head as though waking from a trance, Felicity at last forced her legs to move. She walked stiffly past Scarlett as a footman rushed to open the front door. When she paused before crossing over the threshold Scarlett thought she was going to turn back around. She even held her breath in anticipation. But with another tiny shake of her head Felicity walked out the door... and out of Scarlett's life.

"HOW IS YOUR HUSBAND?" Prudence asked as Felicity sat down between Eleanor and Francis.

"He is quite well," she replied. If her smile seemed strained no one else seemed to notice except for Scarlett. Then again, Scarlett *did* know her best. Having grown up on neighboring estates they'd been bosom friends from the cradle. They had done everything together, from taking lessons on the pianoforte – Felicity had always been the more adept musician – to sneaking out after dark to chase fireflies. They were like sisters... until they weren't.

"Although we have been so busy with the children I am afraid he has not had much time for gentlemanly pursuits," Felicity continued. "We were both grateful to receive your invitation, Eleanor. A night in the company of other adults is just what we needed."

"But of course," Eleanor cooed.

"Children?" Scarlett blurted before she could stop herself. "You've

had another?”

“Yes.” For the first time since she’d entered the parlor Felicity looked directly at Scarlett and everyone sitting around the table took a collective breath. “Anne, named for Ezra’s mother.”

Ezra Whitten, Viscount of Ashburn, was Felicity’s husband. He was a tall, rather severe looking man with dark hair, dark eyes, and a perpetual scowl. To be quite honest Scarlett had never known what Felicity saw in him. Whenever she’d asked, Felicity had merely smiled and said he had a poet’s soul – whatever *that* meant.

Scarlett often wondered if Ezra ever suspected his wife of having an affair. Her pain was so great right after it happened that she would have told him herself, but Felicity must have suspected as much for she and Ezra had gone to Scotland two days later and had not returned for nearly a year. By then Scarlett’s blinding fury had cooled to anger and she’d no longer wanted revenge... she’d simply wanted Felicity out of her life.

To this day no one – not even Eleanor, interfering witch that she was – knew exactly *what* had led Scarlett and Felicity to abruptly end their long friendship, nor why they had become so openly hostile to one another. The mysteriousness of it all made great fodder for gossip, and to this day it was still considered to be a rather delicious scandal.

“Congratulations,” Scarlett said stiffly. She wanted to say more. To ask how old Anne was. To see how their eldest child was doing. To find out if Felicity and Ezra were still happy. But the words would not fit past the coiled knot in the back of her throat.

They said time healed all wounds, but Scarlett had learned the hard

way that the opposite was true. Wounds needed time to fester. Wounds needed time to grow.

Time did not heal wounds.

It infected them.

“Thank you.” Felicity held Scarlett’s gaze a moment longer before she turned her attention to Prudence. The subject quickly shifted to the Warwick Ball – one of the last grand affairs of the Season – and even though Scarlett said all the right things at all the right times, her mind was elsewhere.

It wasn’t until the very end of the dinner party that she found herself alone with Felicity. Joined by their husbands, all of the women had retired to the music room to listen to Eleanor sing. Unable to stand Lady Manheim’s screeching voice, Scarlett had excused herself on the pretense of needing some fresh air to quell an upset stomach. Stopping only to retrieve her cloak and bonnet, she went out the front and followed an uneven stone pathway around to the rear courtyard.

Overhead the sky was a canopy of stars thrown against an inky black canvas. Small stones washed in silver moonlight crunched beneath Scarlett’s ankle boots as she walked to the only tree in the courtyard and leaned against it. The rough bark caught on the fabric of her cloak, pulling at the soft wool. She was in the midst of trying to free herself when she heard footsteps approaching. And even though she had no reason to think it was Felicity walking through the shadows, she spoke her name without turning around.

“Before you demand I leave,” Felicity said quickly, “I have something to tell you.”

At last Scarlett managed to coax the last thread of wool from the tree. She pivoted in a swirl of skirts to find Felicity shivering at the end of the path without so much as a shawl wrapped around her exposed shoulders.

“What are you doing out here?” she snapped. “Go back inside. You’re going to freeze to death.”

“I should think that would make you happy.”

“Just because I hate you does not mean I want harm to befall you.” As contrary as it sounded, it was true. In her heart of hearts Scarlett had never wanted Felicity to suffer true injury. How could she, when they’d once been as close as sisters? It was why she had never understood why Felicity had been able to hurt her so egregiously. Then again, hadn’t *she* done the same thing to Owen?

Stop thinking about him!

“Your actions thus far have certainly proved otherwise.” Felicity’s mouth compressed into a thin line as she hugged her arms against her chest. “You nearly tore all of my hair out the last time our paths crossed.”

Scarlett waved her hand dismissively. “A handful or two at the most and it was an accident.”

“How does one *accidentally* rip out hair?”

“I was reaching for your bonnet.”

Felicity merely lifted a brow.

“Oh, very well. I pulled your hair on purpose. There. Are you happy now?”

“You always did have a temper,” Felicity noted.

“If you have come out here to state the obvious you are wasting your time and mine.”

“I came *out here* to tell you something important.”

“Well?” Scarlett said expectantly when Felicity fell silent. “Spit it out. I haven’t all night.”

“Now I don’t know if I should tell you or not.”

“Oh for heavens—” She broke off with a roll of her eyes. “Stay out here and freeze for all I care. I am going back inside.” But when she went to brush past Felicity she was the one who froze dead in her tracks. All it took was four little words. Four little words that invoked a jolting shock the likes of which she’d never felt before; not even when she’d caught Felicity on the staircase and Rodger above it with that damned silk stocking dangling from his hand.

“Owen is in London.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“WHAT DID YOU SAY?” SCARLETT WHISPERED.

“Owen is in London,” Felicity repeated. “I saw him yesterday. In Hyde Park. It was from a distance, but I am sure it was him.”

“That... that is impossible.” Despite the chilled air a thin line of perspiration formed at the nape of her neck and began to trickle down between her shoulder blades. Inside her chest her heart had gone frantic at the mere mention of Owen’s name and was pounding against her ribcage so hard she could hear the echo of it in her ears like a drum. “Owen despises London. He would never come here.”

“Well he did.”

“You must have been mistaken.” A short blonde curl whipped across Scarlett’s cheek as she shook her head from side to side. “It has been seven years. People change. They look different.”

Felicity hesitated. “I... I saw him two years ago. We met for tea.”

“You did *what*?” Scarlett’s yelp startled a pair of mourning doves who had been roosting. With an angry coo they flew out of the bushes and over the stone fence into the neighboring courtyard. “How could you not tell me?”

“We were not exactly on speaking terms,” Felicity pointed out.

“But it’s Owen. You know how much he meant” – *means* – “to me.”

“I thought I did.” The corners of her mouth tightened. “Then again, I also thought I meant something to you as well.”

Scarlett’s hand rose to her throat, the pad of her thumb brushing against her pulse. It was racing, which was only to be expected. Owen had always had a physical effect on her. The first time they’d kissed she had been surprised real sparks hadn’t filled the air.

“You have to tell me everything. *Everything*,” she elaborated. “But we cannot speak here. I can call on you tomorrow afternoon.”

“Why?”

Scarlett would have thought it was obvious. After all, Felicity was the only person on earth who knew the full extent of her relationship with Owen. She had been there for every part of it. Mayhap not in person, but she’d certainly heard every detail down to the color of the buttons on Owen’s jacket. And when Scarlett had been wavering on whether to follow her head or her heart, it had been Felicity who had urged her to follow her heart.

If only she had listened...

“Because I need to know precisely what he told you two years ago and exactly where you saw him yesterday.”

“No,” Felicity said in a calm, measured tone. “I meant why should I tell you anything? We are no longer friends, Scarlett. We have not been for quite some time.”

Scarlett’s nostrils flared. “You say that as if *I* am the one at fault.”

“Maybe you are.”

“Unless I am mistaken, *you* were the one who was having an affair with *my* husband!”

Felicity did not flinch when Scarlett yelled. She had always been the calmer one between the two of them. The one more likely to consider her words before she spoke. The one who was always thoughtful and kind. Which had only made her betrayal all the more hurtful.

“I told you about Owen because I thought you should know.” A cloud shifted overhead, releasing a stream of moonlight that illuminated the somber set of Felicity’s jaw. “I always thought... never mind.”

“You always thought what?” Scarlett demanded when she fell silent.

“I always thought you would have been happier with him.” Felicity’s gaze flicked down the length of Scarlett’s gown, lingering on the ruby bracelet wrapped around her wrist before returning to her face. “But I suppose other things were more important than true love.”

Scarlett sucked in a breath. Felicity may not have yelled or lost her temper, but her words – and the implication behind them – cut all the same. They sliced even deeper because they held a kernel of truth. She *had* picked Rodger over Owen because of all the things he could give her that Owen could not. It wasn’t the only reason, but it was the one she was the least proud of.

“Rodger and I are very happy together.”

Felicity’s expression was vaguely pitying. “You may have fooled everyone else, but you cannot fool me, Scarlett. I know you too well for that.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Ezra will be looking for me. I should return inside.”

There were so many questions Scarlett wanted to ask her. What Owen had looked like. What he had been doing. If he had been with anyone else. But then it would have seemed as if she still cared about a boy she should have forgotten ages ago, and after having gone to such great lengths to pretend her life was precisely what she'd always wanted she couldn't admit the truth, especially not to Felicity.

A sudden burst of wind swept through the courtyard, catching Scarlett off guard and sending her stumbling back into the tree. When she combed her hair out of her eyes and looked up, Felicity was gone.

THE NEXT EVENING found Scarlett curled up in her favorite spot: an oversized leather chair in front of the library fireplace. She had a glass of sherry within arm's reach and a slender book of poetry open on her lap.

She had never been a voracious reader – she was far too impatient to sit still for the long periods of time a long book required – but nothing helped settle her mind quite like a well-written poem. There was just something about the way the words flowed together that soothed her soul. And after how difficult yesterday had been – the fight with Rodger, Eleanor's underhandedness, seeing Felicity again – she needed a bit of soothing.

It was not often she was caught off guard, but Felicity's revelation that Owen was in London had managed to do just that. Of course she did not know if he was *really* in town. Felicity could have easily been lying. But for what purpose? Scarlett drew the inside of her cheek between her teeth as she thought it over. There really was no reason

for Felicity to lie. Not now. Not after so many years. But that raised the question of just what the devil Owen had been doing in Hyde Park.

He had always preferred the rolling hills of the countryside to the bustling streets of the city. It was but one of the many things they'd disagreed upon... and one of the reasons she'd doubted their future together. How could she run away with a man – although back then he'd been little more than a boy – who would deny her the social life she so desperately craved? If only she'd known how quickly she would grow weary of all the balls and the parties and the plays.

Oh, they were enjoyable for a time. And there was no denying how much she adored dressing up and going out and being seen. But she would have traded it all in a heartbeat if it meant she could see Owen again.

Maybe you can...

Her hand stilled on the page. Hyde Park was a short carriage ride from Grosvenor Square. If she went there tomorrow... but she was being silly. There was no reason Owen would still be there. No proof that he had ever been there at all. And on the exceptionally rare chance that he were, what on earth would she say to him?

'Hello again, Owen. Terribly sorry I married someone else. Would you care for a walk around the pond?'

Her lips twitched. What a fine sight *that* would be. She did not even want to imagine his reaction. He wouldn't yell – Owen never yelled – but he would give her that long, cool stare. The one that let her know he was furiously angry. Or maybe he wouldn't look at her at all.

Maybe he would simply walk away... and her heart would break all over again.

Better she stay away from the park for the foreseeable future. What good could come from dredging up the past? Especially when it would have no effect on her future. For even if she did see Owen again and by some miracle he actually forgave her, there was still the little matter of her being married to Rodger.

“There you are. I’ve been searching the entire house for you.”

As if magically summoned by the mere thought of his name, Rodger suddenly appeared in the doorway. He leaned his shoulder against it, firelight reflecting off the snifter of brandy he held in his right hand. He’d changed into a white nightshirt. The green silk banyan he wore over it gaped open at the chest to reveal a smattering of dusky gold hair. “What are you doing in here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she said with a pointed glance down at her lap.

“I would have thought you’d be at the Havisham’s. Their ball is tonight, is it not?”

Her shoulders lifted and fell in an elegant shrug. Like Rodger she, too, had changed into her nighttime apparel and wore a sumptuous red velvet robe over a simple white nightdress. Her hair was pinned loosely back from her face and her cheeks were pink from sitting so close to the fire.

“I decided to spend the evening at home. *Alone*,” she emphasized. Unfortunately Rodger was either too dense to take the hint, or he simply did not care. She was willing to bet her favorite pair of sapphire earrings it was the latter. “What do you want?” she sighed

when he remained standing in the doorway. He tipped the snifter to his mouth and took a swig of brandy.

“Can a man not talk to his wife?”

Scarlett eyed her own glass of liquor, wishing she had possessed the foresight to fill it all the way to the top. “It depends on what you wish to discuss.”

“I came to apologize,” he said simply.

She bit back another sigh. “What have you gambled away this time?”

“You cannot make anything easy, can you? I came to apologize for the affair.”

Scarlett merely lifted a brow. “Which one?”

He cursed under his breath, and then out loud. “Has anyone ever told you what a bitch you can be?”

“Only my dear, darling husband. Are you foxed?” she asked suspiciously. “Is that why you’re here? Lest you’ve forgotten, this is the library. Your study is down the hall and to the left.”

“I know where my bloody study is!” he snapped, a vein bulging in his temple. He took a deep breath and another swallow of brandy. “It struck me last night when I saw her again that I never apologized for the affair with your friend.”

Scarlett’s mouth opened. Closed. She was so shocked that she couldn’t speak. To the best of her knowledge Rodger had never apologized for anything. To do so now, and to do so with a sliver of sincerity... it was nothing short of astonishing.

“You – you mean Felicity?” she managed to stutter.

“Yes.” He raked a hand through his hair. “I know I am not a perfect man, but that... what I did... it was beneath me. And I apologize for it.”

“I... Thank you?” she ventured, not knowing what else to say. Not knowing what else there was *to* say. Six years was a bloody long time to wait for an apology, but she supposed it was better late than never at all.

“You’re welcome,” he muttered into his snifter.

“Is there anything else?” she asked when he remained in the doorway.

His head lifted. “Whatever you may think of me I am not a monster, Scarlett.”

“No,” she agreed, for it was true. Rodger was not a good man. That much was clear. But he also wasn’t a *horrible* one and truth be told she wasn’t exactly a saint herself. Even when they tried not to they managed to bring out the worst in one another. They always had and, she feared, they always would. “But let us not pretend your indiscretion with Felicity is the only wrong you have ever committed.”

“You’re right,” he said.

Carefully marking her page with a satin ribbon, Scarlett set the book of poems aside and leaned against the arm of the chair. “What are you doing here, Rodger?” she said earnestly. “What do you really want?”

He started to step towards her but changed his mind and remained in the doorway, one foot in the library and one foot out. It was a fitting analogy to how he was as a husband: sometimes committed,

and sometimes not. Sometimes faithful, and sometimes not. Sometimes kind... and sometimes not.

This was not the first time he had shown a glimmer of decency, and Scarlett would not allow her hopes to rise. Rodger was who he was, just as she was who she was. They were two complete opposites who had allowed themselves to be fooled into thinking that if they did what they should then they would get what they wanted. For at the heart of it, wasn't that why she had married him?

Not because she loved him. She never did. Not really. Not in the ways that counted.

Oh, she had loved the way he flirted with her and the extravagant gifts he bought her and how wise and worldly he had seemed. But that wasn't *love*.

Yet another lesson she'd learned after it was already too late to do anything about it.

Ultimately, she and Rodger had gotten married for one reason: because it was expected of them.

It was as simple – and complicated – as that.

If only she had been less selfish and more self-aware! But at only sixteen the threat of being cut off from her family and the hardship of leaving everything and everyone she'd ever known behind had just been too overwhelming.

So she had chosen Rodger. She had chosen Rodger in the vain hope that what she felt for Owen would fade in time and she would be happy with the grand houses and the fancy carriages and the exciting social life that being married to a peer would provide her. And for a

time she *was* happy. Until the disillusionment set in and she realized that no money on earth could purchase the only thing that really mattered.

Love.

“Rodger, what do you *want*?” she repeated when he continued to hover silently in the doorway, his shadow flickering across the bookcase on the far wall.

“Not this.” His brows drew together to form a deep V and for the first time Scarlett noticed just how many lines he’d accumulated.

Lines from scowling. Lines from throwing tantrums when he didn’t get his way. Lines from not enough sleep. Lines from living a life of dissatisfaction. For no matter how much wealth he accumulated or how many beautiful mistresses he lured into his bed he wasn’t happy. Neither one of them were. And for all of the sins they’d committed neither one of them deserved to be.

“This hatred. This vitriol between us.” He gestured towards her with his snifter before lifting it to his mouth and draining what little remained. “It serves no one.”

“You are right. It doesn’t.” Her fingers sank into the arm of her chair, nails making tiny crescent shaped indentations in the soft buttery leather. “But I see no other way. We made our bed a long time ago. There is nothing left to do but sleep in it.”

“We could always divorce.”

Scarlett smiled wryly. “And become social pariahs? I think not.”

“We wouldn’t want that, would we? I suppose I could try not to lose my temper so often.”

It was a promise Rodger had made before. Sometimes he actually kept it for more than a day, sometimes not. Scarlett had learned a long time ago not to hold her breath. “That would be one place to start.” And because she was not completely blameless nor without a temper of her own she said, rather sheepishly, “I could try to do the same.”

“Are you going to bed soon?” For the first time he seemed to take note of her nightdress and satin robe. His gaze drifted to one slender calf she’d inadvertently exposed when she’d twisted in the chair. When he looked back up there was a dark gleam of lust in his eyes that she hadn’t seen in quite some time. It lifted the hairs on the nape of her neck, and not in a way that was pleasant. Fighting the urge to squirm she quickly pulled her nightdress down, tucking it beneath her heels to hold it in place.

“I am not certain,” she said evasively.

“We could go together,” he said with a suggestive lift of his brow.

Scarlett barely managed to contain her snort.

Did he truly think she was so easily manipulated? It would take more than apologizing for an old affair to make her forget about his current one. Scarlett knew she could not avoid her wifely duties forever, but she’d be damned if she would be relegated to the second act. A rather fitting analogy given his current mistress was a well-known actress with the Groenewald Theater Group.

“That depends,” she said with a coy tilt of her head.

“On what?” Rodger breathed.

“On if you are still a friend of Miss Deveraux’s.”

“And if I am?” he said, a note of belligerent challenge creeping into

his tone.

Scarlett sat back in the leather chair and looked into the fireplace where the flames had died down to smoldering embers. A bit of soot had spilled out of the hearth and onto the rug, forming an ugly black stain not unlike the stain Scarlett felt on her heart. "Then I believe I will remain in the library a little longer."

"Of course you will," he sneered. "But a man cannot be faulted for his natural urges. If you do not meet them, then you force me to find someone who will."

That was a quick truce, she thought bleakly. Bringing her knees up to her chest she continued to stare into the fire as a flicker of self-doubt crept into the back of her mind. Was Rodger right? Was his endless parade of mistresses somehow her fault?

Scarlett would be the first to admit that she'd never found the act of sleeping with her husband particularly pleasurable. The grunting and the sweat and the heavy weight of Rodger's body pushing her down into the mattress while he panted into her ear had been something to endure rather than enjoy. But she had never complained. Never voiced her dissatisfaction. Never done much of anything, really, except lay there with her eyes closed and let him do what he wanted.

"Good night, Rodger."

He left without replying, his angry footsteps echoing down the hallway.

Desperately craving the comfort of love from *somewhere*, even if it was trapped within the verses of a poem, Scarlett picked up her book, flipped to where she had placed the silk ribbon, and let herself

imagine Tennyson's beautiful words had been written just for her.

CHAPTER FIVE

STANDING OVER THE DEAD BODY sprawled in the middle of the street, Owen Steel cursed slowly and steadily under his breath. Ignoring the rain falling from a gray and restless sky, he yanked off his hat to run a hand through his hair, fingers sinking into the inky black curls as he continued to stare in aggravated disbelief at the puddle of blood running between the cracks and crevices in the cobblestones.

In all of London, why the devil did it have to be *him*?

“Looks like the poor bastard took a bad fall and broke his neck, eh Captain?” Rubbing his chin where something vaguely resembling a beard was attempting to grow, Felix Spencer peered down at the body and shook his head. “Shame. Bad accident, that. Wonder what he was doing around this part of town? Look at the buttons on his coat.” Crouching down, Felix used his knife to cut one free and promptly stuck it between his teeth. “Damn me, but that’s real gold. And those boots are fine Italian leather. Do ye think he’s a nabob?”

“Yes,” Owen bit out between clenched teeth. “I do.”

Lord Rodger Sherwood may have looked fatter and bloodier and, well, *deader* than the last time their paths had crossed, but Owen was certain it was him. Almost as certain as he was that this ‘accident’

stank of foul play.

“Has his horse been recovered?” he asked.

Felix scratched the back of his neck. “The boys are still out looking. Although in this part of town there’s no telling where the damn thing will show up.”

The East End of London, with its flats stacked on top of flats and weary looking store fronts and drunks sprawled on every corner, was certainly no Grosvenor Square. Which made Sherwood’s presence here all the more questionable.

When Owen first received word that a fancy nabob had been discovered in the East End with his head cracked open his first instinct was the poor bloke had been killed elsewhere and the guilty party had dumped his body where they’d thought no one would ever find it. He’d reversed his assumption as soon as he arrived on the scene. One look and it was clear Sherwood had taken a bad fall off his horse. Which should have made the case a simple one. But Owen knew what his fellow runners did not: in addition to being the world’s biggest bastard, Sherwood was also a damn fine horseman. Which meant unless he had been foxed to the gills – which was always a possibility – it was highly unlikely he would have taken such a serious fall without a little help.

Sweeping his greatcoat to the side, Owen knelt down beside Sherwood and, though it turned his stomach to be so close to the man who had taken everything from him, smelled his breath. When he detected nothing but the faintest whiff of brandy he started to stand up... until a flash of green caught his eye.

Grimacing, he fished his hand beneath Sherwood's body and slowly pulled out a long, thin piece of velvet covered in dirt and blood.

"What's that?" Felix asked curiously as Owen gave it a good shake.

"A hair ribbon." His brow furrowed. "A woman's green velvet hair ribbon."

Felix snorted. "Now I've seen everythin'. What the dickens is a velvet hair ribbon doing out here?"

Hair ribbons, especially ones made out of such an expensive fabric, were almost exclusively worn by women who would rather cut off their own leg than be seen within twenty blocks of the East End. But that wasn't what made it so peculiar.

"I think a better question would be why this hair ribbon was stuck under our victim."

"Ye think it was his?"

"Or his killer's. See that Sherwood's horse is found," Owen said tersely, coiling the ribbon up and tucking it inside his pocket. "Have it brought directly to my office. Do not touch anything on it. Not a single strap or buckle. Do you understand?"

Felix was clearly baffled at what the horse had to do with anything, but he'd learned a long time ago not to question his captain's motives. Steel may have had a strange way about him but he was nearly always right. It was one of the reasons he'd been promoted to Chief Magistrate so early in his career. Well, that and the magistrate before him had keeled over dead in his bread porridge without having named his successor, leaving the runners in complete disarray.

They might have disbanded entirely had it not been for Steel. He

had a quiet way about him, but Felix had seen firsthand how ruthless he could be. When it came time to select a new leader of the Bow Street Runners he'd been the obvious choice. The only choice, when it came right down to it.

"And what are ye going to do? Sir," he added belatedly when Owen's eyes narrowed.

"Go inform the widow of her husband's untimely death."

Felix blinked in surprise. "Ye know who he is, then? The nabob that is."

"I do." *But I bloody well wish I didn't.* Owen scowled as he stuffed his hands into the deep pockets of his coat and turned his back on Sherwood's body.

There was a part of him that always knew he would have to face his past sooner or later. London was a big city – one of the biggest in all of Europe – but fate had a fickle way of always playing her hand at the worst conceivable moment.

He knew he could have easily relegated the duty to another one of his runners. But he wanted to see the look on Scarlett's face when he told her Sherwood was dead. Absently he wondered if she would cry, and decided she most likely would. It was to be expected that a grieving widow would shed tears over the death of her husband, and though he doubted Scarlett would mourn Sherwood's passing, she was nothing if not a consummate actress.

To finally see her again after all of these years...

He still remembered the first time he'd seen her. How could he forget? She had been standing in line to buy crumpets. *No, not*

crumpets, he recalled. Scones. Blueberry scones. She'd ordered so many he'd had to make a special trip out to her parent's estate. Which of course was exactly what she'd wanted.

Scarlett had always been a manipulative bitch. She'd just hidden it well behind innocent gray eyes and a charming smile and a voice so sweet it could have belonged to an angel.

He still remembered the day he'd brought her the scones. He'd walked to her estate from the village. It had been another unseasonably warm day and by the time he reached the end of the long, winding drive he'd been sweating like a stuck pig in the middle of summer.

Elegant and old-fashioned, Edgecombe Manor had sat behind a curtain of silver birch trees. Owen recalled being stunned by the sheer size of it. Why, the front veranda alone could have easily fit the one bedroom flat he shared with his parents three times over.

He had an older sister as well, but she was living with their aunt in Woodshire until her baby was born. A baby that had been conceived out of wedlock; the father a highborn lord who had a well-deserved reputation for dallying with his household staff. He'd tossed Lydia out on her ear after he discovered she was carrying his child and Owen, overcome with rage, had made it halfway to London to demand a duel before his father had managed to drag him back home.

'I know ye are angry,' he'd said, his native Scottish brogue rolling off his tongue as he took his son by the shoulder. 'As am I. But losing your life won't prove anything, my boy.'

'How do you know I'll lose?' Owen demanded, his body shaking with the

force of his anger.

His father had just sighed and shook his head. 'Because when it comes to the nobility, we always do.'

No truer words had ever been spoken, and they'd resonated inside of Owen as he had stared up at Edgecombe Manor with its grand columns and wide balconies and fancy terraces.

Why, he wondered silently, were some people born with so much and others so very little?

Lydia's only crime had been succumbing to the seductive charms of a man who should have known better, and for that she'd been thrown out like a piece of trash, her reputation torn asunder and her life irrevocably ruined. Yet the one who had done the tearing and the ruining, the one who *should* have been held responsible, was in all likelihood sitting in a manor just like this one, sipping his bloody tea and staring up the skirts of another helpless maid.

The injustice of it all rankled. More than that it *burned*, lighting a fire inside of Owen that grew larger and larger with every passing day.

He wouldn't be the poor son of a baker forever. There would come a time when he'd have the strength and the power to make the guilty pay, no matter how wealthy they were or how many titles they had in front of their name.

But until that day came, he had scones to deliver.

Pushing back his wool cap Owen slanted a hand across his brow to block out the afternoon sun and searched for the servant's entrance. The quicker he could deliver the scones and be gone the happier he'd

be. The last thing he wanted was to run into Scarlett again.

He still did not know what to make of her, or why she'd taken such a special interest in him. A bit of boredom, if he had to guess. The rich were always bored. Why else would they set their attentions on a shy serving girl or demand three dozen blueberry scones to be delivered on a bloody Tuesday, of all days?

It didn't make a damn bit of sense.

Spying a narrow wooden door around the side of the house he struck off across the manicured lawn, skirting the edge of a large stone fountain spitting out a steady stream of water. Fat goldfish swam in lazy circles inside the stone basin, their orange scales shimmering in the sun.

A flicker of motion in the corner of his eye captured his attention. The sack of scones he carried over his right shoulder swung high in the air as he turned and then stood frozen with his mouth agape at the sight that awaited him.

Lady Scarlett was marching towards him waving an oversized net in one hand and a silver pail in the other.

For a moment Owen was convinced he was hallucinating. He'd never had cause to hallucinate before, but surely what he *thought* he was seeing wasn't *really* what he was seeing. But when he blinked and knocked his fist against the side of his head Scarlett was still there, albeit several paces closer.

"Hello!" she called out cheerfully. "Wonderful day, isn't it?"

Try as he might, Owen could not summon anything more than a croaking, "Aye."

Scarlett grinned, showing off the dimple that had first caught Owen's eye at the market. He may have hated the aristocracy and everything they stood for, but he wasn't blind. He knew beauty when he saw it and Scarlett, with her blond hair and round cheeks and flashing dimple was easily the prettiest girl he'd ever seen.

And the craziest, he added silently as he watched her skip the rest of the way to the fountain. Setting the silver pail down at her feet, she braced her hand on her hip and cocked one hip out, the subtle movement made all the more noticeable by her low cut bodice. Her chest may have been as flat as a French crepe but the rest of her nimble young body was well on its way to womanhood. And her backside—

Is none of your bloody concern!

She was so far above him she might as well have been the stars that shone outside his window every night. If he had any ounce of common sense rattling around inside of his head he would deliver the scones, collect the money, and run back to town as fast as his legs could carry him. He had enough to worry about without inviting another problem into his life, and Scarlett was a problem just waiting to happen.

Owen's experience with females may have been limited – he was too busy with work to do much more than eat, sleep, and sell bread – but he knew enough about the opposite sex to know the one standing in front of him was nothing but trouble. She had it written all over her face, from the sparkling twinkle in her gray eyes to the mischievous little smile she couldn't quite manage to hide.

"I brought your three dozen scones," he said shortly, swinging the

sack off his shoulder and holding it out. “Ten shillings and I’ll be on my way.”

Scarlett spared the scones only the most cursory of glances. “Would you care to earn a bit more?”

“More?” If there was one thing that could halt Owen in his tracks, it was money. Money meant food and clothes and new boots Lydia desperately needed before winter arrived. “How much more?”

Her mischievous smile grew bigger. “Double.”

Twenty shillings.

A mere pittance for Scarlett; a small fortune for his family...

“Can we move the body now, Cap’n?”

Owen blinked and shook his head as the past collided sharply with the present. When his eyes opened it was Felix standing before him, not Scarlett. Ruthlessly shoving any wayward thoughts of her aside, he forced himself to refocus on the task at hand.

“Yes,” he said shortly. “Get it out of here.”

He watched in stony silence as Felix and two other runners dragged Sherwood’s lifeless corpse across the cobblestones and lifted it into a cart. From here it would be delivered to the undertaker who would do his best to clean up the blood and prepare the body for burial. Given how Sherwood had died it would not be an easy job, nor a pleasant one.

“Felix?” Owen said mildly when he noticed the runner about to climb into the wagon.

“Yes, Cap’n?”

“Take the damn gold button out of your pocket.”

UNABLE TO SHAKE THE FEELING OF UNEASE that had weighed on her shoulders since she'd woken that morning, Scarlett stared out the window at the falling rain and wondered when Rodger would return.

Normally she wouldn't have cared he was spending the day with his mistress – at least, that is where she assumed he was – but this afternoon they were expected at the opening of a new art exhibit at Montagu House. Were it up to her she would have skipped the event entirely. It was Rodger who had insisted they attend.

So where the devil was he?

Biting down on her bottom lip she resumed pacing the length of the drawing room, her soft-soled shoes sinking into the thick carpet. She was already dressed for the event in a flowing muslin gown of sea green, her newly shorn hair swept back from her face by two amethyst combs. A matching necklace glittered on her throat and a bracelet of diamonds flashed on her wrist. Save the line of irritation darkening her brow she looked every inch the well-bred lady wife of a highborn English lord.

The line deepened when the door creaked open and she turned, ready to berate her husband for his tardiness, but instead of Rodger standing in the doorway she found Ruth.

“What is it?” she asked at once, noting the paleness of Ruth's face and the way her hands were twisted together. “Is something wrong?”

“There – there is someone here to see you,” the maid said haltingly.

“Is it my mother? Please tell me it is not my mother.” Scarlett groaned at the thought. While they were always civil to one another –

often painfully so – she and her mother had absolutely nothing in common. Lady Edgecombe may have given birth to Scarlett, but she'd left the raising of her only child to nannies and governesses. Their visits were always stilted and awkward with long gaps of silence between idle remarks about the weather.

“It is not your mother.”

Scarlett breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh thank heavens.”

“It is someone worse.”

“Someone worse than my *mother*?” Her eyebrows shot up. “Do tell.”

“It is... well, that is to say... um...”

“Out with it,” Scarlett said with an impatient wave of her arm. Ruth was a dear, but she did have a rather delicate constitution. Although to her credit it must not have been very easy serving in a household that was constantly fraught with tension.

While most noble families retained their staff for years, if not generations, the Sherwood's always had a revolving door of maids, cooks, and footmen. The only servant who had managed to stay in their employ for a respectable amount of time – aside from Ruth – was their butler, Givens. But he was loyal only to the master of the house, just as Ruth was loyal to its mistress, and Scarlett had never placed much trust in him.

“Perhaps ‘worse’ was the wrong word. I suppose ‘unexpected’ would be a better fit.”

An unexpected guest? Scarlett's nose wrinkled. She could think of no one who would come calling without an invitation, especially in such deplorable weather. Unless...

“Is it Lady Ashburn?” She took a step forward. “Is Felicity here? Because if she is—”

“No, no, it isn’t Lady Ashburn,” Ruth said hurriedly.

“Then for heaven sakes, who *is* it?”

Ruth’s gaze dropped to the floor. “Captain Steel,” she mumbled. “Captain Owen Steel.”

CHAPTER SIX

ALL OF THE COLOR DRAINED OUT OF SCARLETT'S FACE.

Owen couldn't be here.

It was impossible.

Except it wasn't. Ruth would never lie to her, especially about something so important.

"Where is he?" Her gaze flew to the door but it was partially closed, obscuring her view of the hallway. "How long has he been here? Did he request me specifically?"

"Mr. Givens admitted him into the front parlor ten minutes ago." Ruth shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "And yes, he made a point of requesting you specifically, my lady."

"Of course he did," Scarlett muttered under her breath before she drew back her shoulders. Part of her was tempted to simply send Owen away. He never should have come here in the first place. What if Rodger had been at home? It would have been nothing short of a disaster. Yet there was no denying that she desperately wanted to see him again. How many times had she practiced what she would say if they were to ever come face to face? A thousand? Ten thousand? She'd lost track years ago.

“Tell Captain Steel...” She hesitated as she struggled to control her conflicting emotions. “Tell Captain Steel I will be with him shortly.”

Ruth’s eyes widened. “Are you certain that is a good idea? Perhaps you should wait until Lord Sherwood returns home. It would not be seemly for you to visit with a man when your husband is away.”

The irony of Ruth’s statement coaxed the tiniest of smiles from Scarlett’s lips. “It is not *seemly* that my husband is out carousing with his mistress when he should be here with me.” One pale brow lifted a notch. “I am entertaining an old friend, Ruth. And that is precisely what you will say should anyone ask. Do you understand?”

“Yes my lady,” the maid murmured as she stepped to the side, giving Scarlett room to pass. After pinching her cheeks to bring some color back into them, she lifted her chin, murmured a quick prayer, and glided into the parlor.

Her gaze was immediately drawn to a broad set of shoulders encased in a dark jacket. Owen – could it *really* be him? – was standing in front of the mantle with his back to the room. As if he sensed her presence those broad shoulders suddenly stiffened, his entire body coiling like a panther ready to spring as he slowly turned to face her.

“Lady Scarlett.” His voice was deeper than she remembered. He was taller as well, his body lean and well-muscled, evidence of his physical prowess found in the width of his shoulders and the definition of his thighs. His hair was still just as dark, but it was a touch longer than the last time she’d seen him, curling low over his brow and brushing against the collar of his jacket. And his eyes... She caught her breath.

His eyes were as cold as the sleeting rain lashing at the windows. “Or should I say Lady Sherwood now?”

“Scarlett is fine.” Not trusting herself to go any closer than absolutely necessary she remained by the door, one hand curled tightly around the brass knob. Her heart was beating so fast she feared Owen would hear it, but if he did he gave no indication. His countenance was completely devoid of expression, giving away none of what he was feeling.

If he was even feeling anything at all.

Owen shrugged as if it did not matter to him one way or the other. Then his eyes narrowed as his gaze came to rest on the exposed curve of her collarbone where a blonde tendril brushed against ivory skin. “You’ve cut your hair.”

“Yes.” Self-consciously her hand drifted to where he was looking, fingers fidgeting with the edge of her bodice before she forced her arm to drop. “A few days ago. I found long hair no longer suited me.”

“You were always good at getting rid of things that no longer suited you.”

Scarlett drew a sharp breath. She had wondered how long it would be before he fired the first shot. The tiny barb hurt her more than she’d thought it would, drawing blood before it buried beneath her skin. “What – what are you doing here, Owen? What do you want?”

What *was* he doing in London, a place he had always despised? And why was he dressed so formally in a gray tailcoat, stark white neck cloth, and beige breeches that clung to his muscular legs like a second skin? The last time she’d seen him he had been wearing his father’s

hand-me-downs that were two sizes too big and worn so thin as to nearly be see-through. Now every stitch of his wardrobe looked as though it had been tailor-made. If she did not know any better she would have thought him at least a baron, mayhap even a viscount or an earl.

There were other things she'd wanted to say. Other words she'd wanted to use. But the mere sight of him had washed all of those words away, leaving her with nothing but a long list of questions she desperately wanted answered.

Where have you been all these years?

Are you married?

Do you have a family?

Do you hate me for what I did?

She did not have to ask the last question. The answer was already written across every inch of his cold, formidable countenance. Yes, Owen hated her... and the worst part was she couldn't even blame him for it. Not after what she had done. To him. To them. To the future they should have had.

"I have come to inform you of your husband's passing."

He spoke so bluntly that for a moment his words and the meaning behind them did not sink in. When they did Scarlett brought both of her hands to her mouth with a gasp and reeled back against the door, her skull striking the wood with a heavy *thud*.

"What?" she managed to croak between her fingers. "Rodger is dead? How..."

"He fell from his horse and broke his neck," Owen stated matter-of-

factly. “His body was recovered early this morning in the theatre district. Do you know why he would have been there?”

Scarlett stared at Owen with eyes awash in tears, unable to believe not only what he was saying but *how* he was saying it. For all the emotion in his voice he might as well have been talking about the dreary weather or the recent appointment of a new Speaker of the House in Parliament.

“You must be mistaken.” Her own voice was shrill and filled with incredulity. Rodger was *dead*? Impossible. She’d seen him just last night in the library! What were the last words she had spoken to him? Had they been cruel? Kind? Indifferent? Suddenly it was imperative that she remember. She squeezed her eyes shut, searching the vestiges of her memory. He had insinuated she join him in his bed and she... she had asked if he still had his mistress.

His mistress who lived in the theater district.

Scarlett’s eyes flew open.

“Where did you say the body was found?”

“The theater district.” Owen watched her closely, studying every wayward emotion that rippled across her expressive face as she flew through the stages of shock, denial, and finally grief.

Scarlett may not have loved Rodger, but that did not mean she ever wished for him to die. Well, perhaps in a moment of anger... but this was different. This was *permanent*. Her husband was dead. And the man she’d spurned so she could marry him had delivered the news.

“*What did you do?*” Without thinking she flew at Owen with her hands raised and managed to rake her nails across the shadow of

scruff clinging to his jaw before he captured her wrists and pinned them against his chest.

“Nothing,” he snarled, restraining her easily as she continued to claw and kick and scratch. “I did not kill him. You are going to hurt yourself. Stop it. Scarlett, I said *stop it*.”

It was the sound of her name spilling from his lips that finally pierced the thick fog of furious grief. She froze, her chest rising and falling on a gasping breath as she dragged air into her lungs. When the hazy mist rolled away she realized Owen had both of his arms banded around her body. She felt the burn of his touch through the layers of fabric that separated them, the scorching heat of it as achingly familiar as it was painful.

It *hurt* to be this close to him again.

It hurt her body.

Her mind.

Her very soul.

Peeking up at him beneath a thick sweep of blonde lashes she saw his entire jaw was rigid, his icy blue gaze pinned to the far wall. And she couldn't help but wonder if he felt it too. The burn. The heat. The *need*.

Rodger is dead, she reminded herself harshly. *Before you throw yourself into the arms of another man perhaps you'd best mourn the one you just lost.*

“You can release me now,” she said stiffly. “I – I apologize. I did not mean to insinuate you had anything to do with Rodger's death.”

One dark eyebrow shot up. “And here I thought that was exactly

what you were insinuating.” But he let her go nevertheless and she quickly stepped back, putting some much needed space between them even as she cursed her inability to control her emotions.

No matter how angry Rodger made her, she had always been able to command a façade of indifference. Whether she *choose* to do it or not had depended on how much she wanted to infuriate him, but at least she’d been able to pick whether she wanted to be angry or aloof. But with Owen she’d never been able to make that choice. No matter how hard she tried, she could not hide what she was feeling from him. It made her feel small and vulnerable; two things Scarlett was not accustomed to feeling.

Lifting her chin she met his gaze without flinching; no small feat given the erratic flutter of her pulse and the hard, rapid pounding of her heart. “If my husband really is dead—”

“He is.”

“—then how is that *you* are the one to inform me?” Her glare let him know she did not like being interrupted. The faint smirk lurking in the corners of his mouth told her he did not care.

“It is my duty.”

“Your duty?” Her brow creased with confusion. “What do you mean your duty?”

“I am a Runner.”

He did not need to say anymore. Everyone – even Scarlett, who’d never had cause to use their services – knew of the Bow Street Runners. Founded by Henry Fielding, they were Britain’s first organized police force. Comprised of a handful of highly skilled men,

most of which had military backgrounds, the Runners were responsible for upholding law and order on London's busy streets and the outlying towns and villages.

Scarlett had met a Runner only once before. He'd been called to a dinner party she was attending after a guest's emerald necklace went missing. Eventually it was discovered the necklace had slipped off in the carriage and the Runner had left, leaving a swirl of excited gossip in his wake as he'd been quite handsome, but not nearly so pleasing to look at as Owen.

It was a job that suited him, Scarlett decided. He certainly had the look of a Runner: tall and long-limbed with broad shoulders and dark features. He had the mind as well. Always determined to do the right thing no matter the cost. At least now she knew what he was doing in London.

"How did it happen? How did... how did Rodger pass away?" She knew he'd already told her, but in her shock she had forgotten.

"It appears he fell from his horse and his head struck the cobblestones. I am sure you can imagine the rest."

Scarlett flinched. Yes, she could, even though she did not want to. She shook her head to clear the image of her husband sprawled lifeless on the street with his head cracked open like an egg, then knit her eyebrows together in confusion. "But that does not make any sense. Rodger is" – *was* – "an excellent equestrian."

If there was one thing Rodger had always been good at, it was riding horses. To her knowledge he'd never even had a fall, let alone one serious enough to do him any harm.

“Indeed.” His eyes narrowing on her face, Owen studied her with an intensity that caused blood to rush to her cheeks. “I find it rather curious myself. Did you say you knew why he would be in the Theatre District?”

“I – I have no idea.” Lying about Rodger’s affairs had become as second nature to Scarlett as breathing. Shifting uncomfortably beneath Owen’s harsh scrutiny she walked around the back of an elegant sofa, her fingers trailing along the wooden framework. “He must have had business.”

“Before dawn?” Owen watched her as a hawk watched a mouse, his penetrative gaze never leaving her slender body. Not liking his tone or his unwavering stare, Scarlett stopped in front of a large window that looked out over the side lawn.

“I am not always privy to my husband’s schedule.” It was still raining, the sky a gloomy, depressing gray. She watched as droplets of water trickled down the outside of the window. They pooled along the sill before spilling over and cascading across the glass in tiny streams that randomly intersected before splitting off again. *Not unlike Owen and I*, she thought with a bitter twist of her mouth. Fate – or more accurately Rodger’s death – may have brought them into the same room again, but they were still very much apart.

The way Owen was speaking to her... she almost would have preferred he yelled. Anything would have been better than cold indifference, especially when it was tainted with a hint of accusation.

“Why are you asking me so many questions?” She peered at him over her right shoulder, arched brows pulled in close together. “Are

you implying that my husband's death was not an accident?"

"I don't know, Lady Sherwood." His head canted to one side as he stretched his arm out and rested his hand on the edge of the mantle, fingers tapping absently against the stone. "Was it?"

"Of course it was." She did not like the way he was looking at her. Almost as if he were a predator... and she was his prey. "If Rodger fell from his horse as you claim, how could it be anything *but* an accident?"

"I am not certain." And yet he still continued to watch her, his glacial stare causing the downy hairs on the back of her neck to rise.

"Surely you do not think *I* had anything to do with it?"

"Until the investigation has been completed I cannot rule anything – or anyone – out."

Scarlett whirled to face Owen in a swirl of green muslin. "That is preposterous!"

"Is it?" he countered softly.

"Yes. It is no secret that Rodger likes..." She paused, her tongue twisting as she forced herself to speak in the past tense. "*Liked* to drink too much. He was probably foxed and his horse stumbled and he fell. A horrible accident, but an accident nevertheless."

Owen's hand dropped from the mantle and slid into the pocket of his breeches. "Where were you last night?"

"Here. I was here all night."

"Alone?"

"Not that it is any of your business but yes, I was."

He rubbed his chin. "Now I find that rather curious."

“Do you?” she said coolly.

“Yes. You see, I asked around a bit before I came here. If I am not mistaken, there was a ball last night. A ball you were expected to attend.”

Scarlett bristled. She did not like what Owen was saying. More than that, she didn’t like what he was *not* saying. “If I attended every dinner party and ball I was invited to I would never have time for anything else. Unless enjoying a quiet evening at home is a crime, I haven’t done anything wrong!”

“Just asking a few routine questions, Lady Sherwood,” he drawled. “There’s no need to get upset.”

“I am not upset. And you do not need to call me that.” Once Owen had known her better than anyone else. Even better than she knew herself. And it hurt more than she could possibly put into words to have him treat her as if she were a stranger.

“What should I call you?”

“My name.”

A humorless smile lifted the corners of his mouth. “I thought I was.”

Very well, she thought silently. *If that is how you want it...*

“If there is nothing else, Captain Steel, I shall have Graves escort you out.”

Owen began to slowly button his coat. “Your husband’s body will be delivered by the end of the day so you can begin funeral arrangements. Oh, and one more thing. You don’t happen to have any green velvet hair ribbons by chance, do you?”

Scarlett blinked. “Green velvet hair ribbons? I suppose I might. I’m

not entirely certain. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Simple curiosity, Lady Sherwood." He walked past her to the door. "By the way, I am sorry for your loss."

"Yes." Scarlett's smile was so brittle it was a wonder her mouth did not crack into a thousand pieces. "I am sure you are."

OWEN WALKED BRISKLY DOWN THE STREET, forgoing a carriage in favor of feeling the cold rain against his skin. He felt so hot he wouldn't have been surprised to see steam rising off his clothes. Inside the deep pockets of his great coat his hands were curled into massive fists and his expression was such that innocent passersby's stumbled over themselves to get out of his way. Suffice it to say he was not in a pleasant mood, nor even a tolerable one, and he carried his black cloud with him all the way to his office on Bow Street.

Originally the private residence of Henry Fielding, the Runner's infamous headquarters was a traditional three story brick townhouse with white shutters. It sat back from the street behind a wrought iron gate that surpassed Owen's head by a good three inches. Neatly trimmed boxwoods, their leaves still dull from winter, lined a narrow brick walkway that led directly to the front door.

The first floor was reserved strictly for business with three generously sized rooms all boasting long tables which were covered with notes and files and random pieces of evidence brought in from ongoing cases. A small kitchen kept the runners from starving to death, although none of them were very good cooks. They relied on food baskets brought to them by patrons – the majority of which were

women – and never lacked for a midnight nibble when a case carried over into the wee hours of the morning.

Owen's office was on the second floor. It held nothing of a personal nature, not even a photograph, and was fastidiously organized with nary a pencil out of place.

The entire third floor was comprised of his living quarters. He was the first magistrate to use the one-bedroom flat in over two decades. The captains before him had all had homes and families of their own to go to at the end of the day. But for Owen the Bow Street Headquarters *was* his home and the Runners his family.

He'd lost both his parents within six months of each other to a wasting sickness. News of their death had reached him in France via a letter written by Lydia. He still carried the letter on his person; such was his regret that he'd been away fighting for King and Country on foreign soil while his mother and father were at home fighting for their lives. He felt their loss all the more keenly because they'd both begged him not to enlist. But he'd been headstrong, and hurting, and he'd plunged recklessly into war without knowing the cost.

After a long, exhausting service that saw him rise through the ranks from infantry to officer, Owen returned to Britain a man changed. He found himself no longer suited for an idyllic life in the country selling bread and so he journeyed to London, answering the summons of Lord Grant Hargrave, an old friend from his battalion. It had been Grant who told him about the Bow Street Runners, and Grant who had convinced him to join their ranks.

In war Owen had done what was asked of him without question. He

had been a good soldier. Intelligent, brave, quick on his feet. And he had done what needed to be done, but he took no pride in any of it.

There was no honor in killing. No glory. No redemption.

But being a Runner... that was something he *could* be proud of.

This spring would be his second on Bow Street. With every person he helped, with every crime he solved, he mended a piece of his soul that had been stripped away on the bloody battlefields of France. Yet even as his soul was slowly restored his heart remained as cold as ever, frozen solid by the careless actions of a young woman he had once loved beyond reason.

Scarlett.

Even the mere thought of her name caused his jaw to clench as he stormed through the front door and up the stairs to his office with only the most cursory of greetings to the three men standing outside the kitchen. Closing the door with a resounding *thud* (his way of saying that anyone who sought an audience with him did so at their own peril) he opened up the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a bottle of brandy. He did not usually drink, but if he ever needed to dull his senses he could think of no better time than now.

Pouring himself a generous glass he sat down behind his desk, kicked up his legs, and stared broodingly out the window. Chimneys unfurled gray smoke into the overcast sky, obscuring his view of the Thames. On a clear day he could see the tall masts from the trade ships that sailed the river, their white sails billowing out like clouds. But today the rain covered everything in a dull cloak of watery ash.

Looking away from the window Owen raised his snifter to his

mouth and took a small, leisurely sip as his thoughts turned inward.

He had convinced himself Scarlett wouldn't look the same. That she wouldn't smell the same. That one glance in her direction wouldn't elicit a quicksilver response deep down inside of his loins. And in some respects, he'd been right. She *hadn't* looked the same.

She'd been more beautiful than he could have ever imagined. And he'd never had such a hard cock-stand in his entire bloody life.

Just seeing her again... it had brought back everything he thought he'd suppressed. The pulsing need. The scorching arousal. The *knowing* he felt all the way down in his bones that she was meant for him and he was meant for her. That they were meant for each other.

Except they weren't. Scarlett had made that perfectly clear seven years ago when she had chosen Sherwood over him. And the way she'd done it! So coldly. So callously. As if the weeks they'd spent together and the words they'd whispered and the promises they'd made meant nothing. As if *he* meant nothing. With a muttered curse Owen tipped the glass of brandy all the way back and drained the contents in one burning swallow.

To hell with her, he thought as he slammed the glass down on his desk with enough force to send a stack of letters spinning into the air. They fluttered gracefully to the ground in a shower of white. After staring at them for a moment Owen swore again and began to gather them up. He was reaching beneath a chair for the last one when a loud knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," he said brusquely once he'd stood up. Leaning against his desk he began to shuffle the letters back into order, using the

handwritten dates on the top right hand corners.

“Felix said you were back,” Grant Hargrave drawled by way of greeting as he stepped into the office and closed the door behind him. “He also mentioned you were in a pissier of a mood.”

Grant was Owen’s second-in-command. He *should* have been the captain, but when Owen said as much he’d flat out refused and threatened to leave the runners all together if the position was thrust upon his shoulders.

As the third son of a duke Grant could have easily led a life of leisure, but he’d never been the leisurely sort. Tall and lean with a poet’s face and piercing green eyes, he looked far more suited for a ballroom than Bow Street. Given Owen’s innate loathing of the nobility they hadn’t exactly gotten along when they found themselves in the same infantry unit, but after Grant saved Owen’s life – and Owen promptly returned the favor – the two became fast friends.

“Felix needs to learn to mind his tongue.” Setting the stack of letters down on the edge of his desk Owen lifted his head and met Grant’s steady gaze. “What do you want?”

“Just checking in on the stiff from this morning. He was a peer?”

“A viscount.” Owen crossed his arms. “Lord Rodger Sherwood.” Just saying the name set his teeth on edge. He wasn’t glad Sherwood was dead – after seeing enough death to last ten lifetimes he took no pleasure in the loss of life – but the irony of his death did not escape him.

Sherwood was the one who had walked away with everything, including Scarlett. Yet his body was the one being prepared to be put

into the ground while Owen stood here very much alive.

At least fate had little regard for wealth and titles.

“And you think he was murdered?”

“I know he was. He fell because his girth snapped.”

“That sounds more like bad luck to me.”

“Not when the girth was cut.” Felix had been unable to track down Sherwood’s horse, but he had found his saddle. The long leather girth that should have held it strapped to the horse’s body had been neatly severed on one end. What’s more, it had only been cut halfway through – ensuring the saddle wouldn’t have slipped until Sherwood was traveling at a quick enough pace to do himself serious harm when he fell. Which he had.

Owen had kept that information from Scarlett on purpose. He had no concrete evidence linking her to Sherwood’s death – at least not yet – but his gut was telling him she knew more than what she was saying. If she *had* committed murder he wanted her to think she’d gotten away with it... for now.

Grant whistled under his breath. “That’s one way to make a murder look like an accident. Bloody clever if you ask me. Sherwood... Sherwood...” Eyes narrowing to thoughtful slits of emerald green, he rubbed his chin. “The name sounds familiar. I am sure I’ve met him before.”

Owen didn’t doubt that he had. All of the nabobs seemed to run in the same exclusive circles and even though Grant had managed to plant one foot on Bow Street, the other one was still very much trapped in Grosvenor Square. He couldn’t escape his past or his

heritage any more than Owen could escape his. It did not matter that Owen was seven years and one hundred miles removed from the boy he'd been. A single glance at Scarlett was all it had taken to remind him of his meager beginnings.

His teeth clenched as he gave a frustrated shake of his head. He shouldn't have gone to see her. Shouldn't have opened himself up to feelings and desires he'd thought buried long ago. It was his mistake, and one he was not intent on repeating.

"Did you ever catch that burglar who's been breaking into the townhouses on Thistle Street?" he asked, wanting – needing – to change the subject.

"Not yet." Frustration tightened the corners of Grant's mouth. "I always seem to be one step behind the bugger, but he's bound to make a mistake sooner or later."

"Better make it sooner. I've got Lord Munthorpe breathing down my neck. He wants his wife's diamond necklace returned."

"Cheap bastard," Grant said with a snort. "As if he couldn't afford to buy her a dozen more."

"Some nonsense about the necklace being a family heirloom. Either way, see to it. This has gone on long enough."

"I agree."

Both men were quiet for a moment.

"Is there anything else?" Owen asked abruptly. Under normal circumstances he would have appreciated Grant's company, but these were hardly normal circumstances. The only thing he wanted to do was pour himself another snifter of brandy and be alone with his

thoughts. Something that was rather difficult to do when his second-in-command was looming over him.

“No.” Grant’s shoulders lifted and fell in an absent shrug beneath his elegant waistcoat.

Unlike the other runners who wore plain trousers and dark gray overcoats like the one thrown on the back of Owen’s chair, Grant was always impeccably dressed, a residual effect of being born and raised into one of England’s wealthiest families. “The boys and I are going for a pint at The Pony. Care to join us?”

Owen’s gaze slid to the window. The rain had finally stopped, leaving a rolling blanket of mist over the entire city. A sliver of golden sunlight was struggling to squeeze between the clouds but it wasn’t having much luck. Such was London in early spring.

“Maybe later,” he said brusquely. “I’ve a few correspondences to finish.”

“Well if you change your mind we’ll keep a stool warm for you.” With a tip of his head Grant finally left. Owen waited until the echo of his footsteps had retreated down the stairs before he poured himself one more glass of brandy and sat back down behind his desk.

Stretching an arm behind his head he closed his eyes and tilted his head back, ordering his mind to focus on anything *other* than the way Scarlett had looked in her pale green dress with her silky hair pulled back from her face and her smoky gray eyes – eyes that could lure a man to sin or slice his heart wide open depending on her mood – gazing up at him.

But memories fed on silence and before he could steer his thoughts

in a different direction they veered down a path he'd closed long ago.
A path that led to a water fountain and goldfish and the kiss that
started it all...

CHAPTER SEVEN

“QUICK!” SCARLETT SQUEALED. “GET THAT ONE BEFORE HE SWIMS BACK ROUND!”

Water splashed up in Owen’s face as he lunged forward and tried to scoop a fat goldfish into his net, but the bloody creature was too fast for him. With a taunting flick of its bright orange fin it sped away and disappeared around the other side of the fountain. Biting back a curse that would have made a sailor blush, Owen jumped out of the water.

When he’d agreed to help Scarlett catch the goldfish swimming around in the fountain he’d never anticipated the little buggers would be so damn fast.

‘It will only take a moment’ she’d said, her gray eyes all big and soft and imploring. *‘We will be leaving for London at the end of the summer and I do not want them to freeze to death.’*

That had been nearly an hour ago. Since then Owen had managed to catch exactly two goldfish out of the dozen that were quite literally swimming circles around him.

Cheeky little bastards.

“You almost had that one!” From her safe – and dry – perch on the curved edge of the fountain Scarlett gave him an encouraging nod and

clapped her hands together. "You will get him next time. I'm sure of it."

"I would have had the damn thing *this* time," Owen snarled, "if you weren't screaming in my bloody ear!"

She pursed her lips. "I was not *screaming*."

"Then what the hell would you call it?"

"Talking loudly?" she suggested.

"Which is the same thing as screaming."

"It certainly is not. Here, give me the net. I will show you how it's done."

Owen handed over the net and watched, arms crossed and brow furrowed into a scowl, as Scarlett slipped off her shoes, stripped off her stockings, and eased into the water one foot at a time.

"Oh!" she said, slanting him a surprised glance over her shoulder. "It's quite cold, isn't it?"

"You don't say," he bit out sarcastically.

"The trick," she said as she waded deeper into the fountain, holding her skirts bunched in one hand and the net high in the air with the other, "is not to frighten them."

His eyes rolled. "They're fish. What the devil do they have to be frightened about?"

"Oh, lots of things. Birds. Cats."

"Crazy females with large nets," Owen muttered under his breath.

"I heard that," Scarlett said mildly. She'd disappeared behind the fat stone cherub standing in the middle of the fountain and only the top of her bonnet was visible. It bobbed up and down as she splashed

through the water.

“I meant for you to.”

“Do you always say what you think, Mr. Steel?”

“Yes.”

More splashing.

“I rather thought so. I like that about you.”

“You don’t say,” Owen responded, only half-listening as he wondered how much longer this was going to take. When he’d set off this morning to deliver the three dozen scones he never imagined he would end up catching goldfish in a fountain. Although where Scarlett was concerned he was quickly learning to expect the unexpected.

“Indeed. Not many people do. Say what they think, that is. I find it a refreshing quality.” When Scarlett finally made her way around again there was a large goldfish wiggling in her net and a smug smile on her face. “As I said, the trick is not to frighten them. The silver pail, if you please.”

Owen fetched the bucket and held it up. Wading over to him Scarlett carefully flipped the net inside out and the goldfish fell into the pail with a *ker-plop*.

“Three caught,” she said with a satisfied nod. “Nine to go.”

“What are you going to do with them?”

“That is a very good question.” Her head canted to the side as she considered the answer. “I am not entirely sure. Find a large glass bowl or vase to keep them in over the winter, I suppose. Do you mind catching the next one? My legs are getting rather cold.”

Owen couldn’t help but glance down at her legs as she hopped out

of the fountain. Her calves were long and slender, her ankles gracefully rounded, her toenails like soft pink seashells against the green grass. Goose pimples dotted her ivory skin, filling Owen with the sudden urge to kneel down and rub her silky calves until they were warm again.

“Here you are.” Oblivious to the direction of his gaze Scarlett held out the net. With a quick jerk of his chin Owen dragged his eyes away from her coltish limbs and grabbed the net with more force than was necessary, earning himself a reproachful glare.

“What?” he said defensively.

Scarlett’s lips thinned. “If you do not want to help me, you need only say so.”

“I’m holding the bloody net, aren’t I?” He jumped into the fountain, splashing water onto Scarlett who shrieked and leaped back.

“You did that on purpose!” she accused, pointing her finger at him.

“And?” One dark brow shot up in silent challenge. “What are you going to do about it?”

Her bonnet fell to her shoulders as she gave a haughty toss of her head, revealing thick blond curls drawn up in a coiffure that was far too elaborate for someone of her age. In the sunlight her hair glittered like gold, causing Owen to suck in a sharp breath as he imagined running his fingers through the soft curls. He would yank out the pins that bound them one by one until her hair tumbled down into his hands. Then he would pull her head back, not quite hard enough to hurt, and slowly lower his mouth...

No.

Owen's jaw hardened. What the devil was he thinking? Scarlett may not have been acting very much like a lady but that did not change the fact that her blood was as blue as the sky. For that – and for that alone – he could not trust her.

Part of him acknowledged that he was too young to be so bitter, but it was hard to be anything else after he'd held his sister's trembling body while she sobbed into his arms. Scarlett might not have had anything to do with the lord who had planted the bastard child in Lydia's belly, but she was cut from the same cloth.

They all were.

"What is it?" Scarlett asked quietly. Her gray eyes searched his face. "What's wrong? Have I done something to upset you?"

"You haven't done anything," Owen growled. Which of course was part of the problem. If Scarlett behaved as she *should* have – cold, arrogant, disdainful – then surely he wouldn't be fighting against a flame of attraction that was burning brighter with every wayward glance in her direction.

He had been attracted to other women before. He was a young man, after all. But this... this was different.

Owen had first felt it when their gazes met at the market. It – whatever *it* was – had hit him like a hard punch to the gut, leaving him breathless and dazed. For the rest of the day he hadn't been able to get her out of his mind, leaving him so distracted he'd put salt in a batch of muffins instead of sugar.

His ears were still ringing from his father's blustering reprimand.

Catch the damn fish and be done with it, he told himself as he

stomped around the far side of the fountain, sending water splashing up over the edge. *Be done with her. She isn't for you.*

He could feel the cherub's unblinking gaze on the back of his neck as he unsuccessfully tried to snare one goldfish after another. They always managed to wiggle free at the last possible second, their glittering scales mocking him as they darted away.

"Damnit!" Throwing down the net in frustration, Owen folded both arms across his chest and glowered down at the water. His reflection shimmered up at him: a dark-haired boy with flashing blue eyes and the devil's own temper running hot through his blood. "This is impossible. Just give me the ten shillings for the scones and I'll be on my way."

Scarlett walked over to him, leaned over the edge of the fountain, and plucked the net out of the water. Giving it a good shake, she flipped it over her shoulder and regarded Owen with a stern frown that made him feel all of two feet tall. He knew he was *acting* like a bloody child, but damned if he wanted to be made to *feel* like one.

"Nothing is impossible," she said firmly. "The only limitations we have are those we set upon ourselves."

"Easy for you to say," he muttered with a derisive glance at their opulent surroundings. What would Scarlett know about overcoming limitations? She'd been born with a spoon shoved so far into her mouth it was a wonder her teeth weren't stained silver. She did not know what it was like to want for the simplest of things.

A hot meal.

A warm coat.

Shoes without holes.

He was struggling to put food on his family's table and her greatest problem was catching goldfish. If that wasn't a clear illustration of how vastly different their worlds were, Owen did not know what was.

"Ten shillings," he said, holding out his palm.

Scarlett's gaze dropped to his hand. "No."

"No?" he repeated incredulously. "What do you mean, no?"

"You promised you would help me catch the fish."

"I never promised—"

"Do you want them to freeze to death?"

His nostrils flared as he exhaled. "Of course not. But I never—"

"I suppose I will simply have to tell their brothers and sisters that they went to a better place," she said with a sad glance at the pail where the three goldfish they'd managed to catch were splashing about.

"Of all the bloody... give me that," Owen snapped, reaching for the net.

Scarlett's dimple winked as she handed it to him. "Here you are."

He knew he was being played for a fool, but what else was he supposed to do when she looked up at him with those big gray eyes? She was twisting him up in knots and he didn't have the foggiest idea how he was going to untie them.

Blast her and blast her bloody fish, he thought silently as he skimmed the net through the water. It would serve the little buggers right if they *did* freeze to death. He was only trying to help them and in return they were making him look like a bumbling idiot.

“Why don’t we work together?” Scarlett suggested. “I’ll chase them towards you and you just stay there and scoop them up.”

“Fine.” At this point, he was willing to try anything.

Picking up her skirts, Scarlett stepped into the fountain with all the grace of a young queen climbing onto her throne. She really was a sight to behold with her cheeks flushed a pretty pink and tendrils of golden hair curling around her heart-shaped face.

Not that Owen was looking.

Well, not that he was looking very *much*.

He wasn’t blind, was he? And surely there was no harm in sneaking a peek here and there. It reminded him of when he’d stood outside the sweet’s shop as a young boy, utterly transfixed by all of the sugary treats displayed in the window. He’d known he couldn’t afford anything on the other side of the glass, just as he knew he couldn’t have Scarlett.

Not to say he wanted her.

Because he didn’t.

Not in the slightest.

But if that was completely true, why could he not stop thinking about her?

“Bloody hell,” he muttered under his breath.

“What?” Scarlett’s head popped out from behind the cherub, pale brows knitted together.

“Nothing.” His mouth pinched as he scowled at her. “Are we going to catch the damn fish or not?”

“I was waiting for you.”

“Well *I* was waiting for *you*.”

Her smile as sweet as the sugary confections he'd so desperately wanted all those years ago, she said, “On the count of three then. If you are ready, that is.”

“Just get on with it.” Owen knew he was being a short-tempered bastard, but it was his only line of defense against Scarlett's dimpled smiles and silky white calves and misty eyes.

“I am going to start chasing them towards you!” she called out.

Owen gave a short, clipped nod and readied himself to catch the little bastards once and for all. When the goldfish came swimming straight at him he managed, by some small miracle, to scoop them up in the net all at once. Stepping carefully out of the fountain, he shook them out into the silver pail one after another, taking enormous satisfaction in the small *ker-plop* sound they made as they hit the water.

“Did you catch any?” Scarlett was breathless by the time she reached him. Peering over his shoulder she let out a squeal of delight when she saw how many goldfish were in the pail. “Oh! You got them all!”

And then, before he could fully grasp what was happening, her arms were around his arms and her chest was pushed and his chest, and her lips were on his lips.

The kiss was unexpected, but instead of pulling away – as he should have done – Owen pulled Scarlett closer, his enthusiasm making up for his inexperience. The scent of honeysuckle flooded his nostrils as he explored her mouth. When he accidentally nipped her bottom lip

she released the tiniest of moans. The mewling sound fueled the fire coursing through his blood and he scraped his teeth across her plump bottom lip again, harder this time.

“Oh,” she sighed. “I quite like that.”

As their passion rapidly escalated he leaned her back against the fountain, supporting her slight weight in one arm while the other braced against the cherub’s chubby thigh. He felt the sun beating down on the back of his neck, but it was nothing compared to the heat burning inside of him.

Her hands sank into his hair, knocking his cap off. It fell to the ground, completely forgotten as the kiss deepened. Owen ran his tongue across the seam of her lips and her mouth fell open, allowing him to taste her sweet nectar.

Only when he found himself reaching for her soft breast did the reality – and the repercussions – of what they were doing sink through the haze of lust that had temporarily stripped him of any and all common sense.

Bloody hell.

What was he *thinking* ravishing the daughter of an earl in broad daylight? Better men had been hanged for less!

“We shouldn’t have done that,” he gasped as he finally forced to turn his head to the side, effectively ending the kiss. Hoping Scarlett wouldn’t notice the hard bulge in his trousers he tilted his head towards the sky and dragged some much needed air into his lungs.

Stupid, stupid, *stupid*. He’d never done anything so stupid and reckless in his entire life.

“No, we shouldn’t have.” Scarlett’s gray eyes lit up. “Care to do it again?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE PARADE OF CALLERS began just after one o'clock in the afternoon. Scarlett received them in the parlor, already dressed for mourning in a deep purple muslin gown – the darkest color she had on hand – with a black crepe overlay. As she would be expected to wear black for the next six months she'd already sent half of her dresses away to be dyed along with a handful of shawls, ribbons, and two of her least favorite pelisses.

Her hair was completely hidden beneath an ebony bonnet with a short lace veil that covered the upper half of her face. Those present assumed she was wearing it to hide her tears, when in fact she was doing the exact opposite.

Scarlett felt sad Rodger had died. But she would not shed any more tears over him, nor would she allow herself to romanticize their marriage. She hadn't loved Rodger any more than he had loved her, which was to say not at all. But she would still honor his memory if only for the sake of his family who had always held him in a higher regard than he deserved.

He had left behind his mother, whose husband had died three years past, and two sisters, neither of which had ever married. Clustered

together in the middle of the parlor they were alternating between hysterically crying and loudly lamenting the loss of their dear, beloved 'Rodgie'. To preserve her sanity Scarlett had offered her condolences and then retreated to the furthest corner of the room. She would have escaped all together, but with Rodger's body set up for viewing in the drawing room there was nowhere else for her to go without arousing suspicion. So she stood by herself sipping a cup of tea and occasionally dabbing at the corners of her eyes with a black handkerchief; the perfect image of a bereaved widow mourning her husband's untimely death.

For the next three days close friends and family would be allowed to come and pay their respects before Rodger was laid to rest. Then they would be allowed to get on with their lives whereas Scarlett would be expected to remain in mourning for the next year, if not longer. Her lips thinned. There would be no balls, no parties, no plays. She would be expected to remain inside grieving for a man she'd never liked very much, let alone loved. Yet another penance to be paid for following her head instead of her heart.

She glanced up when the Dowager Lady Sherwood released a particularly loud warble. Rodger's mother had always been a bit prone to dramatic airs. To be honest Scarlett was rather surprised she hadn't swooned yet. In preparation for the inevitable collapse she had already armed the maids with smelling salts and had them place extra pillows on the sofa. Short of beginning a countdown there was little else to do but wait.

As her gaze left her mother-in-law and flitted around the room she

couldn't help but wonder how many of the women present had shared her husband's bed. As Rodger's conquests had been quite numerous she imagined it was more than a few, but what did it matter anymore? Rodger was gone. He could not hurt her anymore. And she... she was finally free.

Scarlett's ribcage expanded as she took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Free.

She had gone to bed a wife and woken a widow. It had happened so quickly it was still hard to believe that Rodger was gone. Then there was the way he had died...

In an effort to avoid speculation and embarrassment she'd simply told everyone that an unfortunate riding accident had claimed his life. As such things were rare, but not unheard of, no one had questioned her. It certainly sounded better than the truth: that he'd gotten drunk and fallen off his horse on the way home from seeing his mistress.

And not just any mistress.

An actress.

Scarlett couldn't help but wonder if Rodger's mother would still be crying if she knew *that* little morsel of information. It was one thing to have an affair; quite another to have an affair with someone from London's fast set.

"Would you care for some fresh tea, my lady?"

Scarlett was so absorbed in her own thoughts that she startled when a maid approached with a sterling silver kettle and a miniature pitcher of milk. Mustering a belated smile she nodded and held her cup steady

while it was poured.

“But no milk, please,” she added when the maid began to tilt the pitcher. Pursing her lips, she blew away the steam rising from the cup and took one small sip before her attention was suddenly diverted by a very unexpected – and unwanted – guest.

Standing frozen in the doorway much as she had three nights ago, Felicity’s gaze darted around the crowded parlor before landing on Scarlett.

Of all the nerve... how dare Felicity show her face here! If she thought Rodger’s death had changed anything between them, she was sorely mistaken. Setting her cup of tea down on the windowsill, Scarlett marched across the room and cornered Felicity by the mahogany sideboard where refreshments had been set out on a long lace tablecloth.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded furiously, gloved fingertips digging into her elbows as she hugged her arms tightly against her chest. She had done her best to prepare for Rodger’s family – no small feat given how much of a pain in the arse they were – but she’d never thought to prepare for *this*. It should have gone without question that Felicity knew she wasn’t welcome. There were some things a woman of polite society simply did not do, and attending the funeral of her lover – who just so happened to be the husband of her dearest friend – was one of them.

“I came to pay my respects,” Felicity said quietly. Like the rest of the women in the room she was dressed in all black from the top of her bonnet to the tips of her leather boots, the toes of which were

stained ever-so-slightly with mud. Her cheeks were pale and withdrawn, dark eyebrows standing out in stark contrast against her ashen countenance.

“To Rodger? Please. You have not seen him in years.” Scarlett’s eyes narrowed as a sudden thought twisted her stomach. “Or have you?”

“Do not be absurd.” Felicity’s chin lifted a notch. “I came to pay my respects to *you*, Scarlett.”

It was to Scarlett’s credit that she did not stumble back and knock over a platter of miniature cucumber sandwiches. “You want to pay your respects to *me*? What the devil for?”

“That’s right. It never was a love match, was it?” Her mouth twisted in a humorless smile. “In that case may I offer my congratulations?”

“What are you doing here?” Scarlett repeated through gritted teeth. She shot a quick glance over her shoulder to see if anyone was looking their way, but the Dowager Lady Sherwood’s incessant caterwauling was providing an excellent distraction. The woman must have had enough air in her lungs to fill a hot-air balloon. “You must have known you would not be welcomed with open arms.”

“I assumed as much, but I decided to come anyways.”

“To give me your condolences,” she said dubiously.

“Yes,” Felicity nodded. “And to see if you were finally ready to hear the truth.”

“The truth about what?”

“Rodger and I.”

What was it about the past that suddenly made it so damn eager to be in the present? First Owen, now Felicity. For the better part of a

decade Scarlett had not spoken to or seen either one of them and in the span of two days they'd both showed up on her doorstep. If she didn't know any better she would assume they were conspiring against her. Conspiring to do *what* she wasn't exactly certain, but she knew it couldn't be anything good.

"I know the truth, Felicity. I saw it with my own eyes." She arched a brow. "If you are looking for your long lost stocking might I suggest the middle drawer of Rodger's armoire? I believe he has quite a few in there."

"*Stop it,*" Felicity hissed.

Her second brow lifted to join the first. "Stop what?"

"Pretending as if our friendship means nothing to you."

"It doesn't."

"Yes it does or you wouldn't still be hurting after all these years. As I said before you can fool everyone else, but not me. I know how miserable you have been. It is written all over your face."

Scarlett's hands immediately rose to her cheeks. What was *that* supposed to mean? Did she have blotches? Because Lady Elmwood had blotches and they were really quite hideous.

"It is not," she said defensively even as she tugged her veil a little bit lower, just to be safe.

"It is if you know what to look for."

"I think you need to leave. *Now.*"

"No." Felicity's violet eyes took on a gleam of determination. "Not until I finally say what I should have said all those years ago on the staircase."

“I am not interested in hearing anything you have to say.”

“Yes you are, you’re just too stubborn to admit it.”

Well she was right about that. Scarlett *was* too stubborn, but she also did not want Felicity to tell her something that would change the way she’d thought about her all these years. It was easy to hate someone. All you had to do was heap all of the blame upon their shoulders instead of your own. It was far more difficult to consider there were two sides to every story. Particularly when it was a story you did not want to hear.

“This is not the time or the place.” She looked deliberately around the crowded parlor. “I am a grieving widow, after all.”

Felicity released an uncharacteristic snort. “Please. You are not grieving over him any more than I am.” Lowering her voice she a harsh whisper she said, “Rodger was a bastard who deserved what he got.”

Scarlett’s eyes widened in surprise. While she agreed with Felicity’s sentiment, she’d never heard her use such a venomous tone before. Maybe it *would* be worth finding out what Felicity had to say even though she had an uneasy feeling she wasn’t going to like what she heard.

“We can go in the library. No one should bother us there. Follow me,” she said curtly.

No one tried to stop them as they navigated their way out of the parlor and down the hall. True to form Rodger’s mother had begun to sway on her feet and no one even seemed to notice Scarlett and Felicity were leaving, let alone the fact that they were leaving

together.

All of the curtains in the library were closed and the fireplace lay dormant in an effort to discourage anyone from inadvertently wandering in. While it was one thing for Scarlett to open up her house to friends and family, it was quite another to allow them access to her private sanctuary. The library was, as it had always been, for her pleasure and her pleasure alone.

Although as she went from one window to the next, sweeping open the curtains and allowing a wash of weak sunlight to trickle over the bookshelves and leather furniture, she couldn't help but hear the echo of the last words Rodger had ever spoken to her. They were trapped here, forever imprinted on the walls and the books and the black soot staining the fireplace.

A man cannot be faulted for his natural urges. If you do not meet them, then you force me to find someone who will.

Was it irony that he'd done exactly that and died for his trouble?

Or poetic justice?

Perhaps a little bit of both, she decided as she sat down on a sofa with gold tassel trim and motioned for Felicity to sit across from her in a matching chair.

"I believe I will remain standing, thank you."

"Suit yourself." Making herself comfortable, Scarlett leaned back amidst the cushions and propped her feet up on a small table cluttered with a hodgepodge of her most cherished books. All of the bindings were creased and the pages worn thin from having been read so many times. The three volumes of *Sense and Sensibility* were by far the most

threadbare. She'd read them more times than she cared to count and every time she grew more frustrated with Marianne Dashwood.

Why couldn't Marianne see what a rake and ne'er-do-well John Willoughby was? It was clear from the very beginning that Colonel Brandon was hopelessly in love with her, yet she spurned his affections in favor of a man who was only using her for his own means! If Scarlett could have reached through the pages and given Marianne a firm shake she would have. But of course that would have meant giving *herself* a firm shake, for weren't she and Marianne one and the same? Both silly, foolish women who hadn't seen what was best for them even when it had been right in front of their faces.

"Well?" she asked pointedly when Felicity remained wrapped in a silence so tense it vibrated the air like a harp string that had been too tightly wound. "What were you so eager to tell me that it couldn't wait a single second longer?"

"I – I do not know where to begin."

"I always find it best to start at the beginning." Her mouth thinned. "Or in this case, when you began sleeping with my husband. Tell me, was it something you planned? Or did it just happen? I have always wondered. Of all people I know how charming Rodger can be. Not that that excuses what you did." Suddenly she was on her feet, hands curled into fists at her sides as all of the hurt came bubbling violently to the surface. Raising her voice to a near shout she cried, "How could you? How *could* you do it, Felicity? You were my dearest friend!"

"And you were mine!" Felicity shot back. She stopped and whirled to face Scarlett, her amethyst eyes glittering with tears. "We were

more than friends, we were sisters. How could you think your sister would do something so deplorable?"

"I never thought you would." When Scarlett felt the familiar burn of tears in her own eyes she blinked them furiously away. "But I was there. I saw you coming down the staircase. You were—"

"Taken against my will."

The words, so softly uttered, stole the breath from Scarlett's lungs. Her legs quite simply stopped worked and she collapsed back onto the sofa as all of the blood drained from her face.

"What did you say?" she whispered hoarsely.

Felicity's bottom lip trembled. "That morning you saw us together. Rodger... he... he forced himself upon me."

"I do not understand." Bile rose in Scarlett's throat, making it difficult to speak. She wanted to accuse Felicity of lying, but the truth was right there for her to see in the bright sheen of Felicity's eyes and the stark whiteness of her cheeks.

"He was always a bit too forward with me even before you were married. He would – well, you know how he was."

Yes, Scarlett knew how Rodger had been.

But she'd never imagined...

No.

That wasn't completely true.

She never *let* herself imagine. But hadn't she suspected? Or, if not suspected, then surely she had at least wondered. But Felicity had never said anything, and it had been easier to hate her than to consider the horrific possibility that Rodger had forced her into an

affair against her will.

“I am so sorry.” Her limbs felt as though they weighed twenty stone as she stumbled around the edge of the table. Felicity met her halfway and for the first time in far too long the two women embraced.

Scarlett let her tears fall freely down her cheeks for she was no longer crying for herself, but for Felicity. For the pain she had endured and for the secret she had kept. A secret that had been allowed to fester for far too long.

Only when Felicity’s shoulder was thoroughly drenched did Scarlett finally pull back and force herself to look her friend in the eye. “Why did you not say anything after it happened?”

“How could I?” Felicity’s narrow shoulders rose and fell in a miserable shrug. “You were only just married. Even if I told you the truth there was nothing you could have done.”

Scarlett gripped Felicity’s hands and squeezed. “I could have stood by you. I *would* have stood by you.”

“To what end?” She gave a small, sad shake of her head. “You would have still been trapped in a marriage to a man you despised. Better you think the worst of me instead of your husband. I wanted you to have a chance at a happy marriage, not ruin it from the very beginning.”

Bollocks on that, Scarlett thought silently.

“I already despised Rodger.”

“But not like you do now.”

“No.” Her eyes flashed a dark, stormy gray. “Not like I do now.”

It was a pity someone could only die once. Were it up to Scarlett

she would have seen to it that Rodger died a thousand painful, fiery deaths. Falling off his horse and breaking his neck had been too easy of an ending for the bastard.

“When I saw you on the staircase was that the first time...”

“Yes,” Felicity said quickly. “It – it only happened once. I shouldn’t have come calling so early, but I was hoping to surprise you. Except you were not at home.”

The corners of Scarlett’s mouth tightened. “But Rodger was.”

Felicity managed to nod. “It happened so quickly,” she whispered and when her gaze dimmed Scarlett knew she was no longer in the library but another room and another time entirely. “I – I told him to stop. At least I think I did. It’s all a horrible blur.”

With every tear that spilled from Felicity’s dark lashes Scarlett’s guilt intensified. She should have known all along Rodger was the one to blame. It filled her with shame that she’d chosen to believe an easy lie instead of seeking the painful truth. And the way she had treated Felicity all of these years...

“You do not need to say another word,” she said firmly. Taking Felicity by the hand and leading her over to the sofa as one would a child, she pushed her gently onto one of the thick cushions and sat down beside her. “In fact, you need never speak of it again if you do not want to.”

“But I cannot escape it,” Felicity said on a muffled sob that tore at Scarlett’s heart. “I will *never* be able to escape it.”

“Rodger is dead now.” Not knowing what else to do, she tentatively brought her hand to Felicity’s spine and began to rub her trembling

back in large, soothing circles. “He cannot hurt you anymore.”

Felicity buried her face in her hands. “Ezra wants a divorce. He – he has fallen in love with someone else.”

Scarlett’s hand stilled.

Men.

Why could they never be satisfied with what they had? Felicity was beautiful, loving, and kind. Ezra was lucky she had even glanced in his direction, let alone agreed to marry him. He should have been counting his blessings and instead he was busy flipping up the skirts of another woman.

To hell with the lot of them, she thought in silent disgust. She wanted to say as much out loud but it only took one glance at Felicity’s ashen countenance to know they were not words her friend was ready to hear. At least not yet.

“I am sure it is just a passing fancy,” she said instead. “Give him a few weeks and he shall realize the error of his ways. I’ve seen the way he looks at you. The man is mad with love.”

“You mean the way he *looked* at me,” Felicity said bitterly. “Before he met *her*. He left me and the children two days ago. He has already brought divorce proceedings before a bishop. It will only be a matter of time.”

“On what grounds?” Scarlett demanded.

“Adultery.”

“*Adultery*? Have you ever–”

Felicity’s cheeks flushed. “No. Aside from Ezra, Rodger is the only other man I have ever...well, you know.”

“But that was seven years ago!” Scarlett said, her voice ripe with indignation. “And it wasn’t your fault! Surely it does not count.”

“It does if it resulted in a child,” Felicity whispered.

Scarlett’s breath caught. “Do you mean little Henry—”

“I don’t know.” Her hands dropped away from her face and buried themselves within the folds of her skirt. “But I suspect... I suspect it may be possible. The dates work and Henry has blond hair. No one in my family does, nor in Ezra’s. Oh Scarlett.” Tears ran down her cheeks in rivulets as she tilted her head back and stared blindly up at the ceiling. “What am I going to do?”

CHAPTER NINE

“I HAVE SOMETHING THAT MIGHT TAKE THAT SCOWL OFF YOUR FACE.” Entering Owen’s office without bothering to knock – the only man who could do so and live to tell about it later – Grant walked to his Captain’s desk and held out a small leather pouch.

“What the bloody hell is that?” Owen asked, dark brows pinching over the bridge of his nose as he leaned forward, his shadow rippling across the far wall.

It was well past midnight, but a Runner’s work was never done, especially when most of the criminals they hunted prowled the streets of London between the hours of dusk and dawn. He’d only just returned from a murder down by the docks. Some poor bloke had ended up belly down in the Thames with a knife sticking out of his back. It was the third floater that had been fished out the river this week alone.

Sometimes Owen felt as if Bow Street was actually making a difference and then there were other times, like tonight, when he feared there was no end in sight to London’s depravity.

“Open it and see,” Grant invited with a grin. “Go on. You’ll like it. I promise.”

Owen picked up the pouch. “Where have you been?” he asked,

taking note of Grant's unusually disheveled appearance. Of all the runners Grant was always the most impeccably dressed, but not tonight. Tonight his coat was ripped and there was mud – at least, Owen hoped it was mud – splattered across his shirt.

“I had a lead on the thief that's been pinching those townhouses. Managed to track the chit all the way past Blackfriars Bridge, but then she managed to disappear into Dickens Square.”

A dark labyrinth of alleys and twisted streets, Dickens Square was a veritable fortress of wickedness. Like a rabbit disappearing into a thicket of brambles, it was where a criminal went if they wanted to escape the clutches of the law.

Owen's eyebrows rose. “*She?*”

“Didn't I tell you? Turns out our little jewel thief is a woman.” Now it was Grant who scowled. “A red-haired vixen with a penchant for knives.” He glanced down at his coat. Upon closer examination Owen realized it had not been ripped, as he'd originally assumed, but rather sliced.

“Nearly stuck you, did she?”

“What she *did* was ruin a perfectly fine jacket. Go on then,” Grant said with an irritable jerk of his chin. “Open that up.”

Loosening the drawstring, Owen flipped the pouch over and gave it a shake. When a single earring fell into his palm he pinched it between his thumb and pointer finger and held it up to the oil lamp in the middle of his desk. A large, square cut sapphire surrounded by tiny diamonds caught the light. “This is worth a pretty penny. Where the devil did you find it?”

“Well that’s the interesting part. It was given to me this afternoon when I went to check on a body. By Thomas Guthridge.”

That got Owen’s attention. Guthridge was the undertaker who had prepared Sherwood for burial. Sitting up straighter in his chair, he examined the earring more closely, turning it back and forth. Unfortunately, there were no identifying marks that he could see. “Did he say where he found it?”

“He did indeed.” Grant’s expression turned smug. “Says he discovered that little beauty when he was undressing Sherwood. Thinks it must have gotten caught on his clothing.”

Owen’s hand closed reflexively around the sapphire earring. While it did not prove anything on its own, it was yet another piece of evidence that Sherwood’s death was more than what it seemed. If he could somehow find a way to link the green hair ribbon and the sapphire earring back to Scarlett...

“Interesting,” he murmured. “Very interesting.”

Grant lifted a brow. “I told you that you’d like it.”

“A ROOM HAS BEEN READIED for the children at the end of the hall. It is directly across from yours as you requested. All of your trunks have been brought up and the maids are in the process of unpacking. Is there anything else you need?”

“No,” Felicity said with a weary, albeit grateful smile. “You’ve done more than enough.”

“It is the least I can do.” Three weeks had passed since Rodger’s funeral and Scarlett – along with Felicity and her two children – had

just completed the long, arduous journey from London to Surrey. They'd arrived a full month before the end of the Season, but given that Scarlett was in mourning and Felicity was in hiding following her humiliating divorce trial no one had objected to them fleeing the city.

In fact, no one had even seemed to notice they'd left.

"I am going for a walk around the grounds." After four consecutive days trapped within the cramped confines of a carriage with three other adults and two squalling children, Scarlett desperately needed to stretch her legs. "Would you care to join me?"

"No, thank you. I had best help the nanny settle Henry and Anne into their room. They're quite exhausted."

That makes three of us, Scarlett thought silently.

"Very well. I will see you at dinner, then?"

"Yes. I do hope you enjoy your walk. It is a lovely day." If Felicity's smile was stiffer than usual, both women did their best to look the other way.

Despite their reconciliation there was still an edge of formality to their friendship that had never been there before. Scarlett hated that they felt more like strangers than the sisters they had once been, but there was nothing she could do but let time bring them back together. Felicity needed time to heal from Ezra's abrupt abandonment and she... well, she needed time to figure out what the devil she was going to do now that her husband was dead.

The law did not look kindly upon widows. It was only a matter of time before everything she and Rodger had owned – their carriages, Rodger's collection of fancy thoroughbreds, their townhouse in

London and their country estate in Surrey – would either be given to the closest male heir or returned to the king if no such heir could be found. Never mind that Rodger had kept their properties from falling into ruin with the money from *her* dowry.

Forgoing a bonnet, Scarlett whisked a shawl over her shoulders and stomped outside. It was a bright, beautiful spring day but the clear blue skies did little to raise her spirits. Walking to the middle of the circular stone drive she turned around and looked back up at the manor, a wistful sigh escaping from her lips as she studied the familiar columns and jutting terraces and sprawling gardens that were just beginning to bloom.

Of all the things she was about to lose, she would miss this estate the most. She regretted that she had not spent more time here amidst the rolling hills and quiet solitude. Soon it would all be gone and there was nothing she could do. Oh, no doubt she would be given a small settlement. Even if Rodger's will – which still had yet to be found – hadn't taken her needs into accord it was customary that the widow of a peer be given *something* in the way of compensation.

She supposed she could always go running back to her parents. They would take her in without question, but the idea of living beneath her mother's thumb yet again was enough to set her teeth on edge. She would rather be a pauper than a puppet dancing on strings that someone else controlled.

If only she'd reached such a realization before she decided to marry Rodger! It would certainly have saved her a tremendous amount of trouble, not to mention heartache. But what was the use in imagining

what could have been? It served no one, least of all herself.

Striking out across the lawn Scarlett veered right when she reached the stables and headed down a small hill to the pond. A pair of ducks swam lazily through the water, their paddling feet stirring up a rippling current in their wake. They lifted their heads when Scarlett approached but after a few quacks and a few flaps of their wings they settled down and meandered over to a collection of bristly cat-tails.

Walking around the far edge of the pond, she slipped off her shawl and spread it on the grass beneath the shade of a towering oak. Since she could not remember the last time she had sat outside with her bare feet pressed to the earth she kicked off her shoes, stripped off her stockings, and proceeded to do precisely that. On a long, contended sigh she stretched her legs out, leaned back against the rough bark of the oak, and closed her eyes.

She had been in gilded ball rooms and sumptuous theatre boxes and pretty parlors for so long that she'd forgotten what it felt like to simply be out in nature with the sun on her face and dirt between her toes. As she sat on the ground with a faint breeze lifting the curls off the nape of her neck and the twitter of birdsong sweetening the air, she was afforded a rare glimpse at what her life might have been like had she chosen Owen.

It wouldn't have been fancy, and it wouldn't have always been pretty, and it *certainly* wouldn't have been filled with elaborate balls and fancy dresses and dinner parties. But oh, how happy she would have been! How happy *they* would have been.

"Well done, Scarlett," she said aloud as she opened her eyes and

looked up through the leafy branches at the sky above. How close it seemed, and yet when one tried to grasp a handful of the blue it was always just out of reach. Not unlike the dream she'd once had of running away with Owen and living happily-ever-after. "Well done."

CHAPTER TEN

OVER THE NEXT THREE DAYS Scarlett and Felicity managed to fall into a routine of sorts. They had breakfast in the solarium while Henry and Anne were being tended to by their nanny, conversing on such titillating topics as the weather and how quickly the daffodils were blooming. Then Scarlett would go for her morning ride – something she hadn't done in years – while Felicity did whatever it was one did with children. They spent the rest of the day in separate wings of the house, occasionally coming together to play a game of cards or have a cup of tea in the parlor. For supper everyone, including Ruth and the nanny – a young woman with bright red hair and a rolling Irish accent to match – ate in the dining room. Afterwards Felicity went upstairs to put the children to bed and Scarlett read in the library, often falling asleep with a book still open on her lap.

And so their lives went until, on the sixth day, a visitor came to call.

Scarlett was just about to depart for her daily ride when he arrived without warning or even so much as a calling card. She heard the deep rumble of his voice before she saw him and would have retreated back up the stairs if only to give herself time to prepare, but by then it was too late. The footman had already opened the door and as if drawn by

a magnet Owen's gaze shot across the foyer and up the staircase to where Scarlett stood frozen on the middle step, one foot hovering in mid-air.

The scene was so reminiscent of when she'd walked in to find Felicity standing on the very same staircase that she felt a wave of *déjà vu* and had to shake her head twice to clear it before she managed to croak, "What – what are you doing here, Captain Steel?"

"I came to see you."

Scarlett knew it was folly, but she could not but feel a stirring of hope deep inside of her chest. "Me?" Her hand gripped the railing with so much force that her nails inadvertently dug a furrow of crescent moons in the wood. "Whatever for?"

Any secret desire that Owen had traveled all the way to Surrey because he'd suddenly realized he could not live without her was crushed in the blink of an eye when he growled, "You are a suspect in your husband's murder. I've come to question you."

If Scarlett had not been clinging so forcefully to the railing she surely would have tumbled down the stairs top over tea kettle, so great was her surprise. What on earth was Owen talking about? She was a suspect? In her husband's *murder*? But Rodger had not been murdered, he'd fallen off his horse!

"Is there somewhere more private we can go?" Owen's cold gaze raked her from top to bottom, skimming dispassionately down her form-fitting riding habit before returning to her shocked face. "Unless you would prefer to make your confession in the foyer. It makes no difference to me."

“The parlor,” she managed to choke out. “We can go in the parlor.” Lifting her chin she descended the staircase and glided past him with small, measured steps that helped to disguise how fast her pulse was racing. Waiting until Owen had followed her into the parlor she closed the door with a quiet *click* and turned to face him.

“Now what nonsense is this about Rodger being murdered?” Glaring up at him, she tilted her head back and pinned her hands to her slender hips; a haughty queen staring down one of her subjects. Never mind that this ‘subject’ was easily twice her size and looked more like a dark prince with his thick ebony hair and piercing blue eyes than a lowly vassal. “You said he was foxed and fell off his horse and broke his neck.”

Owen’s mouth twisted in a humorless smile. Like the last time he’d paid her a visit he was dressed in a form-fitting tailcoat that accentuated his broad shoulders and fawn colored breeches that clung to his muscular thighs, leaving little to the imagination. His dark hair was uncovered and windswept, a thick tendril hanging low over his brow. “I never said he was foxed. Those were your words, I believe.”

“Because it does not take a genius to assume he had been drinking.” Her eyes rolled. “Rodger was *always* drinking.”

“Is that why you killed him?” Picking up a small glass swan from a mahogany drum table Owen absently traced the delicate neck with his thumb. “Because he was a drunkard?”

“Oh for heavens – I did not *kill* my husband!”

“Why was he in the theatre district?”

“How am I supposed to know that?” she said evasively. “I wasn’t

there with him, was I?"

"This will go easier for you if you don't lie," Owen said as he pinched the swan's neck between his pointer finger and thumb. Scarlett's own throat tightened in response.

"I am not lying." Except she was, and they both knew it. But how could she admit – to *Owen* of all people – that her husband had died on the way home from visiting his mistress? The only thing more humiliating would be if he'd died *in* Miss Deveraux's bed like Lady Pratt's husband had last year. "What even makes you think he was murdered? Was he robbed?"

Owen gave a curt shake of his head. "No."

"Well, was his horse stolen?"

"No."

"Was he beaten?"

"No."

Scarlett threw her hands up in exasperation. "Then *why* do you think he was killed on purpose?"

"The girth on his saddle was cut." Owen carefully set the glass swan back down on the table. "Which caused his saddle to slide, which caused him to fall."

"And you think *I* had something to do with it?" She barely managed to contain her snort. "I have never tacked a horse in my entire life. I wouldn't know how to cut through a girth, let alone have gone skulking about the theatre district by myself to do it."

He studied her without expression. "Desperate people do desperate things, Lady Sherwood. Or maybe you just hired someone to do it for

you. Either way, I know you were involved.”

This time she did snort. “That is a preposterous notion.”

“Is it?” The thick carpet muffled Owen’s footsteps as he crossed the parlor. Scarlett folded her arms across her chest and held her ground, her glittering gray eyes daring him to come closer. She knew he wouldn’t touch her. Not when he held her in such obvious contempt. But he did come near enough for her to smell his scent; an achingly familiar mix of sandalwood and evergreen that instantly brought her back to a time when Owen had gazed at her with love instead of loathing.

The unexpected tears that burned the corners of her eyes caught her off guard. Sucking in a sharp breath she turned her head to the side, feigning a sudden interest in a painting above the fireplace.

“I would like for you to leave now.” She was proud that her voice did not tremble, but she knew it was only a matter of minutes – mayhap even seconds – before her composure crumbled. And that she would not allow Owen to see. She couldn’t. Her damned pride would not allow it.

Have you thought about me at all over the years? The question burned the tip of her tongue but she swallowed it back, knowing she’d given up the right to ask it when she’d given up on them and any future they might have had together.

“I have more questions.”

“But I do not have any answers.”

“You never did.” The sudden gruffness in his voice indicated Owen was no longer referring to Rodger’s death and Scarlett sucked in a

painful breath. She wanted to reach out to him. Wanted to close the distance between them and wrap her arms around his neck. Wanted to feel the solid weight of his chest beneath her cheek and his thudding heartbeat in her ear. Wanted desperately to remember what it felt like to be loved and desired.

But her fear of rejection was too strong, and her pride too was great, and so instead of walking towards him she stepped further away.

“Leave,” she repeated as she reached blindly behind her and opened the door. “Now.”

To her immense relief he did as she requested, walking so close to her that if she’d had the courage she could have reached out and brushed his arm. He stopped in the doorway.

“You haven’t proven your innocence.”

Scarlett’s mouth thinned. “And you haven’t proven my guilt. Good day, Captain.”

Owen had enough self-control not to slam the parlor door, but the front door was not so lucky. The violent sound it made as it slammed shut echoed through the entire house. But instead of making Scarlett flinch, it filled her with the faintest stirrings of hope.

Perhaps he is not completely immune to me after all, she thought as she sank down onto the nearest chair and buried her face in her hands. *Or at least not as much as he pretends.*

A slammed door wasn’t much, but it was something. Anyone else may have viewed it as a simple sign of frustration, but Scarlett knew Owen. She *knew* him. He was not a man to easily lose his temper, nor

let it show when he did. Which meant he was far angrier than he would have liked her to believe. She lifted her head to stare bleakly across the room. Could he still care for her after all of these years?

He no longer loved her. That she knew for certain and the weight of it sat like a stone inside of her stomach. But surely even the tiniest bit of anger was better than complete indifference, and Owen's fury had been so great it shook the rafters.

"I am sorry." In the empty room Scarlett finally allowed herself to say the words she was too proud to say to his face. And then, with no one to witness her despair, she wept them.

"WELL?" FELIX ASKED EXPECTANTLY when Owen sat down across from him in the crowded tavern and nodded at the nearest serving wench to indicate he'd take a tankard of ale.

"She had something to do with it. I don't know if she's guilty of murder, but there's something she isn't telling me." He pounded a fist against the table to vent his frustration, earning a wide-eyed glance from Felix.

The Captain was notorious for keeping his emotions disguised behind a countenance of stone. It wasn't often he revealed what he was truly thinking, and Felix had *never* seen him so out of sorts over a woman. Which was why he'd been so surprised when Owen had insisted on following Lady Sherwood from London to Surrey even though there was no evidence linking her to her husband's murder.

"Have a drink," he suggested when the Captain's tankard arrived, frothy white foam spilling down the sides. "It's not half bad."

Owen took a swig of the ale and managed – barely – not to spit it onto the floor. He should have remembered that by Felix's standards pure gin was 'not half bad' either. Pushing the tankard aside he leaned back in his chair and stared pensively over Felix's head at the far wall.

He shouldn't have gone to the Sherwood Estate unannounced, but the driving need to see Scarlett again – if only for a few minutes – had outweighed common sense. She had looked so beautiful with her gray eyes snapping fire and her cheeks flushed with indignation. It had taken all the will power he possessed not to snatch her against his chest and kiss her senseless.

Bloody hell.

Disgusted with the traitorous direction of this thoughts Owen picked up the tankard of ale and forced himself to take another drink. Had the past seven years taught him *nothing*? Was he still the same love-struck fool who had given his heart away only to see it butchered before his eyes?

No, he thought vehemently. No he wasn't.

That boy was dead. In his place stood a man whose heart had been forged of iron on the bloody battlefields of war. A man who knew better than to let himself be distracted by a pretty face. A man who would never forget *or* forgive no matter if seven years had passed or a hundred. For he may have changed, but Scarlett hadn't. She was still the same conniving, manipulative bitch she'd always been. Except now she had gone from breaking a man's heart to breaking his neck. And this time Owen was determined to not only prove she'd committed the crime, but hold her responsible for her actions.

“I want the Sherwood Estate searched top to bottom, just like the townhouse was.”

“But we didn’t find anything in the townhouse,” Felix pointed out.

Owen’s glare was so potent it sent a serving wench who had been approaching their table scurrying in the opposite direction. “Which is why I want the estate searched.”

“With Lady Sherwood still in it? Don’t ye think that will be a bit of a problem?”

“You’re the thief. Figure it out.”

Before Felix had joined Bow Street as a Runner he’d made his living pinching jewels and paintings off the rich and powerful. He had been good at it. So good that when he’d finally been caught Owen had offered him a job instead of shipping him off to Newgate. To say the other Runners had been doubtful of his decision would have been a grave understatement, but Felix had proved his loyalty time and again and now they accepted him as one of their own without question.

“I’m not saying I can’t do it,” Felix said, looking vaguely insulted. “I’m just saying it would be easier if Lady Sherwood wasn’t hanging over my shoulder the entire time. Unless ye want me to do it at night.” His eyebrows lifted as a sly grin stole across his countenance. “In that case I’ll leave right now.”

The idea of another man sneaking around Scarlett’s bedroom while she was asleep – even a man he trusted – caused Owen’s hands to curl into fists.

“No,” he growled. “You’re not a bloody thief anymore.”

Felix blinked. “But you just said–”

“I know what I said.” He gave a frustrated shake of his head and took another gulp of the foul tasting ale. This case was already twisting him up in knots and it had barely even begun. Maybe it was better if he stepped back and turned it all over to Grant. But that would mean missing the expression of Scarlett’s face when she was officially charged with murder, and that he wouldn’t give up for the world.

“I will see to it she’s gone for a few hours tomorrow afternoon. You can search the estate then. Look for anything that might incriminate her. A green velvet hair ribbon or an earring that matches the one the undertaker found on Sherwood’s body will suffice.”

“How are you going to get her out of the house?”

Picking up the tankard, he drank the remainder of the ale in one bitter swallow before slamming it down on the table. “Let me worry about that.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

EVERY MORNING SCARLETT RODE THE SAME PATH. She began in the rolling hills behind the estate, allowing her mare to plod and pick her way along before urging her into a canter as they descended into a flat valley that ran parallel to the road.

She started her ride early enough in the day that the road was almost always vacant, which was why she was surprised to hear the unmistakable clip-clop of approaching hooves. Slowing her mare to a bouncing trot she took the reins in one hand and shaded her eyes with the other as she twisted in her seat to catch a glimpse of the rider coming around the bend. If the cadence of their horse's hooves was any indication they were approaching rather quickly. With a frown she pulled her mare down to a walk and pressed her left heel into her side, indicating they should move further into the valley. As well-trained as she was pretty, the mare obediently side-stepped, leaving plenty of room for the approaching horse to ride through without incident.

But instead of passing by they began to slow down, causing Scarlett to glance back over her shoulder yet again, her hand unconsciously tightening on her thin leather riding crop. It would be almost unheard

for a highwayman to be on this particular road, especially at this particular hour, but the way her life had been going as of late she knew anything was possible.

“Be ready to run, Fancy.” When she tensed her mare tensed in response, thin nostrils flaring as her muscles bunched and coiled in wordless anticipation.

Then the approaching rider turned the corner... and Scarlett’s pent-up breath exploded in a gust of relief when she saw it was no nefarious highwayman coming up behind them, it was Owen. Thank goodness!

Wait.

Suspicion nipped at the heels of relief as she turned Fancy in a tight circle. What was Owen doing *here*, of all places? It was a good five mile ride from the nearest village which was where she could only assume he was staying. So what had possessed him to ride down a narrow country road in the early morning hours of dawn when the birds were hardly awake, let alone any people?

She clung to her mare’s tawny colored mane for balance as they leaped over a narrow ditch and climbed up onto the road, weaving between two large oak trees. Expertly pivoting Fancy with the slightest pressure from her heel, she waited until Owen and his large black gelding were within earshot before she called out, “Are you following me?”

“I could ask the same thing of you.” Reining in his mount, Owen approached at a leisurely walk. He was dressed for riding in gray breeches and a loose fitting white tunic that revealed a scandalous

amount of his muscled chest. His skin was tanned a golden brown, indicating he often rode without a cravat or a waistcoat.

Scarlett's tongue flicked across her bottom lip as her heavy lidded gaze, hidden beneath the brim of her hat, hungrily devoured every inch of him. Then she remembered what he'd accused her of the last time they'd met, and she forced any wayward thoughts of desire aside in favor of narrow-eyed skepticism.

"If your being on this road is a simple coincidence, feel free to ride through." She gestured down the dirt lane with a broad sweep of her arm but Owen made no move to urge his gelding onwards. Instead he leaned back in his saddle, as comfortable as if he were reclining on a sofa, and regarded her with a lifted brow.

"Do you always ride by yourself?"

"When I can," she replied warily. Why was he being so cordial? She shifted her weight, one gloved hand coming to rest on the horn of her sidesaddle. "What do you want, Captain Steel?"

"What every man wants." His thin smile fell short of his eyes. "A bit of fresh air and sunshine."

"Those two things are of abundance in the countryside," she noted. "How peculiar that you should search for them on this particular road."

"Quite." A flicker of something familiar passed through his gaze as he looked at her, but it was there and gone again quicker than Scarlett could blink. For the briefest of moments it had almost looked like... *longing*. Her breath caught in her throat before she released it with an irritated shake of her head. She was looking for things she wanted to

see.

“Good day to you, then,” she said with an elegant tilt of her head.

“Would you care to ride together? Unless of course you are so adverse to the company of an old friend that you would rather proceed alone,” he added when the corners of her mouth tightened into a frown.

Scarlett’s fingers tightened on Fancy’s reins as a blossom of hope tentatively unfurled inside of her chest. Maybe she *hadn’t* been imagining the longing in Owen’s eyes. “I was not aware you considered me an old friend.”

He urged his horse to take one step and then another and another until they were close enough for Scarlett to see the dark shadow of whiskers clinging to his jaw and the steady throb of his pulse beating beneath the scruff. He held her gaze without blinking, blue eyes sinking into an ocean of gray.

“Perhaps it is time I started.” He spoke in a husky voice that sent shivers of delight racing up Scarlett’s spine. She drew on the inside of her cheek, worrying the flesh between her teeth like a dog with a bone.

To go with him...

To not go with him...

Was it really even a question?

“I suppose I see no reason why we cannot ride together, at least for a little while.” She hesitated, lashes sweeping towards her cheeks as she lowered her gaze to her mare’s neck. In doing so she missed the dark gleam of contempt that flashed in Owen’s eyes. When she looked

back up it was gone, leaving no signs of ever having been there at all. “I would – I would very much like to know how you became a Runner. If you care to tell me, that is.”

He smiled. “I can think of nothing I would like better.”

They rode side by side beneath the shadowy canopy of trees as Owen revealed – much to her dismay – how he had joined the King’s army and battled Napoleon on the bloody shores of France.

“You could have been killed!” Scarlett cried, her stomach twisting at the thought.

“Many men were.” His jaw hardened. “Far better ones than me. Would you have mourned me if I died, Lettie?”

She sucked in a sharp breath.

Lettie.

It was his secret name for her. One she’d never allowed anyone else to use. She thought he’d forgotten all about it... but apparently not. Was it a sign that his cold hate for her had begun to thaw? Or an accidental slip of the tongue? Either way, surely it meant *something*.

“Of course.” She stole a sideways glance at him. He sat so tall in the saddle, his long body moving with his horse’s in a casual grace that would have been the envy of many an equestrian. She did not recall him being such an accomplished rider and could only assume his talents had come from the battlefield.

Not many soldiers were able to gain an officer’s commission without purchasing one. That Owen had done so was not only indicative of his bravery and horsemanship, but a sign of his determination. The back of Scarlett’s neck heated as a wave of shame

descended upon her. How could she have ever doubted him? He may not have had Rodger's wealth or title, but he'd forged a life for himself nevertheless. And not just any life, but an honorable one that helped people. How many men did she know who could say the same? Certainly not her husband. Yet *still* she'd chosen him.

"Owen, there is something I should have told you long ago—"

"I do not wish to discuss the past," he snapped with an unexpected ferocity that took her aback.

"I – I thought that was precisely what we had been doing."

"My past, yes. But not *our* past." His gaze met hers in a flash of unreadable blue before he looked down the road. "After Napoleon was captured and the war ended I returned home. But I felt... unsettled."

You always did, she thought sadly. Owen, with his pure heart and big dreams and empty pockets, had always had one foot in his world and one foot in hers. How much easier his life would have been if only he'd been born a nobleman! Yet even with all the obstacles he had been forced to overcome, he'd still become a noble man.

Owen had done more with nothing than most did with everything. Had there really been a time when she thought *he* wasn't good enough for *her*? How foolish and small-minded she'd been! He had every right to despise her. Every right to look down on her. Every right to hate her.

He'd given her his pure heart and instead of treasuring it, she'd tossed it aside as if it were an old pair of shoes that were no longer in fashion. If there was blame to be given for how things had ended between them she would gladly take all of it. But what she wanted

him to know – what she *needed* him to know – was that she was no longer the same self-centered, vain girl she'd been. She was a woman now. A woman changed by her circumstances and her choices. A woman who knew what *really* mattered in life... and it wasn't money or titles or prestige.

It was love.

Love bought what money couldn't. Love gave without inheritance. Love did not care about appearance or popularity or reputation. *Love* was what mattered. At the end of a life, whether it be long or short, rich or poor, it was the only thing that did.

If Owen did not want to talk about the past then she would do everything in her power to make him look to the future. A future, God willing, that included both of them.

"You always wanted to help others." Ducking to avoid a low-hanging branch, she sat back up in the saddle and absently brushed a leaf off the shoulder of her riding habit. "I am glad you were able to become a Runner. It suits you. Your parents must be very proud."

A shadow rippled across Owen's face. "I am sure they would have been," he said gruffly, "had they not passed before I returned home."

Scarlett flinched. "I am sorry, Owen. I know how close you were to them." She'd only met his parents once. He'd invited her for supper while her own parents were in London and even though sparing the extra food must have been costly, Mr. and Mrs. Steel had welcomed her with open arms. "They were very kind people."

"Yes," Owen said without looking at her. "They were."

The road narrowed as it twisted through the forest. For a while the

only sounds came from the chirping of birds high in the trees and the rhythmic clip-clop of hooves on the hard dirt. Scarlett began to sneak glances at Owen as they plodded along. Just little peeks that afforded her the tiniest of glimpses at his hard thighs, trimmed waist, and wide chest. When she eventually worked her way up to his face she found him looking at her with amusement.

“Like what you see?” he asked, one dark eyebrow arching.

Scarlett lifted her chin, unashamed to have been caught staring. “Yes I do.”

“As do I.” Owen’s eyes turned from blue to smoldering black as his gaze roamed down across her body, lingering on the swell of her breasts and the curve of her hips. “You were always beautiful, but now...”

“But now?” she whispered when he paused. They’d both stopped their horses and stood side by side in the middle of the road, their legs nearly touching. Scarlett could all but feel the desire pulsing between them. Lust pooled in her belly like honey, slowly sliding down between her legs when he reached out and tucked a loose curl behind her ear, knuckles brushing against the side of her cheek.

“Now you are stunning.” His arm fell away as a sneer curled his lip. “But then the most vicious things always are.” With a sudden cluck of his tongue he sent his gelding surging forward into a canter, leaving Scarlett staring at a swirl of dust.

SHE MANAGED TO CATCH UP WITH HIM A MILE DOWN THE ROAD. He had dismounted and led his horse to a stream to drink. Both man

and equine were crouched down alongside the shaded bank, the horse with his head lowered as he thirstily gulped down the cool, refreshing water and Owen sitting on his heels with his back to the road.

“I am going home,” Scarlett called out, a frosty bite to her tone even as she secretly willed Owen to turn around. Of course he did nothing of the sort, stubborn man that he was. Gripping the horn of her saddle with one hand she turned Fancy in a circle with the other. “Did you hear me? I said I am—”

“I heard you.” Uncoiling his long, lanky body, Owen stood and scowled at her over his shoulder. “The entire bloody countryside heard you.”

How did he do it? She wondered silently. How did he look at her with such yearning one moment and such utter loathing the next? Were his feelings truly so conflicted? She *knew* he was still attracted to her. He may not have said as much in so many words, but she wasn’t blind. She’d seen the way his pulse had quickened when he’d touched her cheek.

Oh, he wanted her all right. Every bit as much as she wanted him.

He just did not *want* to want her.

“We need to talk about what happened seven years ago. If you would just let me explain—”

“I know what happened. I was there.” Even from a distance she felt the coldness of his gaze. It raked across her skin like ice, leaving her chilled to the bone. “You made your choice, Scarlett.”

“*But I made the wrong one!*” Her frustrated shout startled a cluster of sparrows that had been pecking at seeds on the side of the road. In

unison they flew up in a whirlwind of feathers and Fancy, having always been predisposed to a flighty nature, leaped forward and then spooked to the side. Had Scarlett been focused she would have been able to keep her seat, but her attention was not where it should have been. When Fancy went right she went left, spilling headlong over the mare's shoulder.

The fall wouldn't have been horrible – a bruised ego, nothing more – if her foot had not gotten caught in the stirrup. But it did, and instead of tumbling clear of Fancy's hooves she slid directly beneath them, releasing a sharp cry when her head struck the ground.

Dimly she heard Owen shout her name. He was yelling something else, but she couldn't hear what it was above the roaring in her ears. Her hands and elbows scraped painfully against the road as she twisted this way and that, struggling in vain to both evade Fancy's iron shoes and free her foot from the stirrup.

The mare was prancing in place, caught somewhere between her training and her flight instinct. All it would take was one solid blow to the head for Scarlett to be seriously injured or worse. She did not even want to think about what would happen if her frightened horse took off down the road.

"Steady girl," she gasped, struggling to keep her voice as calm and soothing as possible despite her precarious predicament and the dull throbbing inside her skull. "Just – just stand still. That's a girl. Just stand still and – *bollocks*," she cursed, tears of frustration and pain flooding her eyes when she tried to twist up and grab the stirrup iron only to fall back beneath Fancy's hooves.

Black spots danced in front of her eyes as her vision blurred and panic began to set in, making mere seconds feel like hours. Just as she began to fear the worst Scarlett suddenly found herself swept to safety as a pair of strong, muscular arms yanked her out from beneath Fancy's legs and cradled her in a protective embrace.

As her head rolled back she caught a glimpse of Owen's clenched jaw... and then her eyes closed and she saw nothing at all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I could have lost her.

The thought reverberated through Owen's head again and again, like a loop without end as he carried Scarlett to a large tree beside the stream and sank down onto his haunches in the shade.

Her limp body felt impossibly fragile in his arms, her bones as delicate as that of a tiny songbird's as he held her nestled against his chest. He would like to have taken her to a doctor, but he feared the jostling ride would do more harm than good. While she was not bleeding, there was a small bump on the side of her skull from when her head had struck the ground. Aside from the scrapes on her hands it was the only sign of physical injury. And so he waited for her to wake, knowing from his experience on the battlefield it could take anywhere from a few minutes to several hours.

In sleep she looked like the girl he remembered. The girl he had fallen hopelessly, helplessly in love with. Her expression was content. There was only the slightest curve to her mouth as though she were dreaming of something that pleased her. Her cheeks were the warmest shade of pink. Her lashes fanning down like the wings of a butterfly. During the fall her hat had been lost and her curls were tangled

around her face in a golden halo of silk. Unable to help himself Owen gently smoothed her hair back, not wanting for her to wake with tendrils in her eyes.

He fancied her short hair. It was bold and brazen and a bit on the cusp which suited her. Even when they were young adults – no more than children, really – she had been a little wild. A little different. A little unique. It was that uniqueness that had drawn him to her. That had helped him look beyond the sheen of a pretty face and fancy clothes to the girl she had been beneath. A girl with a heart as big as the sun and dreams that rivaled his own.

Or so he had thought.

Conflicting feelings warred inside of Owen's chest as he began to gently stroke Scarlett's arm, hoping the light pressure would be enough to rouse her.

I could have lost her.

When her lashes began to flutter and a line appeared across the middle of her brow he tensed, unconsciously holding his breath until those smoky gray eyes opened and she looked up at him.

"What... where am I?" Her voice was raspy. Her eyes filled with confusion. But she did not struggle. If anything being held in his arms seemed to soothe her, and with a quiet sigh she turned her head inwards until the side of her face was pressed against his heart. "I thought I was going to die," she murmured, her words muffled against his shirt. "You saved me."

Owen's arms tightened around her slender frame as the instinctive urge to protect what was his surged through him. *Except she is not*

yours, he reminded himself harshly.

She never had been.

“You’re awake. How do you feel?” There was nothing in his brusque tone that implied he had been afraid for her. Nothing to signal he’d held her with tenderness. Nothing to show the hard wall of ice around his heart had just suffered its first tiny crack.

I could have lost her.

Belatedly Owen realized he was still stroking Scarlett’s arm even though she had woken. Annoyed by the unconscious gesture of affection he stopped at once, fingers curling inwards to form a fist.

“Well enough, I suppose.” A grimace contorted her features. “Although my head hurts like the devil.”

“That is to be expected after the fall you took.” Owen wondered if he would ever get the image of her dangling helplessly from the saddle out of his mind. The fear he had felt in that moment... It had been suffocating. Were it not for his military training he doubted he would have been able to remain calm enough to approach Scarlett’s mare without spooking her.

He’d always regretted fighting in France. Taking another human’s life, even in battle, left a black stain on the soul that no amount of time could remove. But he would have gladly fought again on a thousand different battlefields if it meant saving Scarlett’s life.

I could have lost her.

“You were almost killed,” he said, more harshly than he had intended.

She frowned up at him. “You say that as if it were *my* fault Fancy

spooked.”

“If you hadn’t screeched like a banshee she wouldn’t have.”

“I did not screech.” She tried to sit up, but with another pained grimace she collapsed back into his arms and pressed a hand to her temple. “Bloody hell that hurts.”

“Be still,” he growled.

“Maybe I would if you weren’t insulting me!”

“The truth is not an insult.”

“Oh.” She actually bared her teeth at him like a little blonde-haired fox. “You are *impossible*. Then again you always were. I don’t know why I thought seven years would make a difference.”

Owen barely managed to contain his snort. The truth was that even when he and Scarlett had been consumed by the throes of young love they had always fought like cats and dogs. There had been no cruel edge to the banter like there was now, but they’d rarely stumbled across a topic they both agreed upon. It was one of the reasons he’d been so taken with Scarlett. She hadn’t been afraid to speak her mind, or follow her heart. Even when her heart had led her to the poor son of a baker...

“Romanticizing the past is best left to poets and playwrights, Lady Sherwood.”

“And we’re back to Lady Sherwood,” she muttered under her breath. “I do not know why I even bothered. There is no point, is there?”

His eyes narrowed. “No point to what?” He was trying to listen to what she was saying, but it was rather distracting having her more or

less sitting in his lap. It had been manageable when she'd been unconscious, but now that she was awake and squirming...

Owen knew he could have stood up and set her down on her own two feet, but he wasn't ready to let her go. Not because he enjoyed holding her. No. Of course not. What was the saying? *Hold thy friends close and thy enemies closer.* Yes. That was it.

His grip tightened, settling Scarlett more snugly into the crook of his arm. There was a smear of dirt above her right brow and another beneath her chin. Her hair was snarled and a button was missing from her jacket. She was a mess, in every sense of the word. And he wanted to kiss her so badly he ached.

"No point to *us*." Without any warning her gray eyes flooded with tears.

"Stop that," Owen demanded gruffly. He knew it was most likely an act, but seeing her misery so blatantly displayed made him feel as though he'd been punched in the gut.

"Stop what? Showing emotion?" Her laugh was bitter, and just a bit sad. "Not all of us hide behind stone walls, Captain Steel. Some of us actually feel things."

His jaw clenched. Is that what she truly thought? That he was cowering behind a wall made out of stone? If only she knew how *much* he felt.

Anger. Pain. Resentment.

Yearning. Desire. Lust.

From the second he'd seen her again he had been fighting a war inside of himself. A war he did not know if he wanted to win... or

lose.

“I feel more things than you could possibly imagine.”

“Oh really?” Her eyes sparked with challenge even as tears continued to roll down her cheeks. Each one that fell cut Owen anew, slicing through his armor as though they were made of daggers instead of salt and water.

“What do you feel,” she asked, “besides loathing?”

“*This*.” Lowering his head, he pressed his mouth to hers.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE MOMENT OWEN'S LIPS touched hers all of Scarlett's pain, from her pounding head to her throbbing hands, faded away into blissful oblivion. Desire unfurled inside of her belly like a wild rose. Dormant and withdrawn during a long, cold winter its petals bloomed bright and bold at the first true hint of warmth.

He kissed her softly, almost hesitantly, his mouth a mere whisper as he nibbled teasingly at her lips. But having waited so long to feel the sun on her face again Scarlett wanted more than a whisper.

Reaching up with both hands she grabbed the lapels of his jacket and gave a good, solid yank, demanding he come closer. A low throaty growl rumbled in his throat as he obliged her, sinking down as she arched up.

She ran her fingers through his dark silky hair. The kiss deepened, their tongues meeting as their mouths slid open. And it was the same and it was different and it was everything she could have dreamed and nothing like she could have ever imagined.

He cupped her breast, his thumb flicking across her nipple. She moaned from the pleasure of it, and the wonder. To be touched again by someone she loved... there were no words to describe the feelings

that were pulsing through her body.

It was more than lust. More than desire. More than passion.

It was hope in its truest form, and she wanted more.

Grass tickled her cheek as Owen gently lowered her to the ground, cushioning her head and neck in the crook of his arm. They stretched out side by side, their gazes not quite meeting even as their hands explored each other's bodies, skimming across hard edges and soft curves before their mouths met in another kiss that left Scarlett reeling.

She pressed herself against him, felt the hard bulge of his arousal against her thigh. Then tasted his moan as she stroked him through his breeches.

Owen's blue eyes were wild as he rolled her onto her back. His breathing harsh and uneven as he held himself above her with his arms locked and his jaw clenched. Courtesy of her fingers his hair was disheveled and there were four red scratches on the side of his neck where her nails had bitten him.

"We need to stop," he gritted out, his gaze darting in the direction of the road.

Scarlett started to protest until she followed the direction of his stare and saw the gleaming black top of a carriage slowly making its way towards them. As reality set in her entire face suffused with color. She had allowed herself to be so swept up in their kiss that she'd completely forgotten where they were! Not in a bedroom, or a library, or even a house for that matter, but within sight of a main road where anyone who happened by could see them rutting about on the ground

like animals. And she was a widow in mourning!

Well, a widow who was *supposed* to be in mourning. She certainly had not been thinking about Rodger while Owen was nibbling on her bottom lip, or cupping her breasts, or tracing the curve of her ear with his tongue...

The carriage was getting closer. With a gasp of alarm she rolled out from underneath Owen and sat up, her hands instinctively going to her hair. What had once been a neat coiffure was now a mess of tangled curls. While Owen tucked his shirt back into his breeches, she scoured the ground for the pins he'd pulled loose and managed to find four of them hidden amidst the long blades of grass. Not enough to replicate the sleek up do Ruth had styled for her before she'd left the house this morning, but at least she was able to quickly fashion her hair into something that did not scream, '*I have just been kissed senseless*'.

Wordlessly Owen extended his arm and she allowed herself to be pulled to her feet, wincing as the fog of their passion rolled out and the pain from her fall rolled in.

Heavens, but she was going to be sore tomorrow.

"Where are the horses?" she asked.

"Over there." He pointed to a tree several yards away and Scarlett saw both her mare and his gelding grazing quietly beneath it, their reins tied to a low-hanging branch. "Remain here. I'll go get them."

She would have offered to accompany him but he was already striding away. Left alone beneath the tree that had witnessed the reawakening of their passion, Scarlett leaned against its broad trunk

and worried her swollen bottom lip between her teeth as she wondered what they would do next. More specifically, what *Owen* would do next. She knew what she wanted. It was the same thing she'd wanted since their eyes had met in the village square all those years ago. She may have taken the long way around, but she'd eventually ended up where she was always meant to be. The only question that remained was if Owen had done the same.

If she were to make a decision based on the passionate kiss they'd just shared, her answer would be a resounding yes. Yes, Owen wanted her and yes, he wanted to be with her. As her friend. As her lover. As – she barely dared to think it – her husband. But if there was one thing she knew to be true it was that the heart did not see life in black and white, but rather in every shade of gray imaginable.

Owen desired her... that much was clear. But he didn't yet trust her, and then there was the little matter of Rodger's death to contend with. Although after what they'd just shared she was confident Owen no longer considered her a suspect. If he ever had to begin with. Maybe it had just been a clever ruse to get close to her again. If so, it had worked marvelously.

"Do you think you can ride?" he asked when he returned with the horses and handed her Fancy's reins. "Your estate is not far. Only another half mile or so down the road."

"Yes," she said without hesitation. "I don't doubt that I will be sore for several days, but it is nothing that a hot bath and a glass of wine cannot fix."

"In that case I will return to the village." To her frustration his

expression was once again shuttered, his eyes revealing nothing as he met her gaze. If not for the grass stain on his shoulder and the scratches on his neck she might have thought she'd dreamt the entire thing! "Unless you would like me to escort you home."

Of *course* she wanted him to escort her home. Then she wanted him to escort her right up the stairs and into her bed. But she wanted him to *want* to do it or else what was the bloody point?

It struck Scarlett then. What she needed to do. It was so blatantly obvious that she laughed.

"Are you sure you are all right?" Owen asked, frowning at her with suspicion as if the fall had somehow addled her brain.

"I am wonderful," she grinned. "I am positively wonderful. Thank you very much for your offer, but it will not be necessary. As you said my estate is less than a mile."

"Very well." Yet he continued to stand there and frown until she waved off his concern with an airy flick of her wrist.

"I am fine. I promise. If you will help me mount I will be on my way. No doubt Felicity will be wondering where I have been."

Owen stilled. "Felicity Ashburn?"

"Yes. Although I suppose she will start going by her maiden name again. Wouldn't want to have *two* Lady Ashburns once her bastard of a husband remarries." Just thinking about it was enough to heat Scarlett's blood. "Felicity and her children are staying with me until they get back on their feet." *Or until we're all thrown out on our ear*, she added silently.

There was no telling how long it would take before Rodger's closest

male heir would lay claim to the estate, but until he did Scarlett intended to remain. She had done her time, hadn't she? She had been a good wife. Perhaps not a dutiful or particularly obedient one, but she'd played the part in public. She had ignored Rodger's affairs – for the most part – while not indulging in any of her own. And she *hadn't* killed him even though he deserved it for what he'd done to Felicity.

"Is something the matter?" Her head tilted to the side when she noted Owen's odd expression. He suddenly seemed unsettled, though she could not imagine why. "I was under the impression you and Felicity were friends. She mentioned you met for tea a few years ago."

"We did. I was simply unaware she and her children were staying with you."

Scarlett shrugged. "Yes, well, opening my home to them is the least I can do after the abominable way I treated her. I am sure, living in London, that you would have heard of our falling out."

"Bits and pieces," he acknowledged with a clipped nod. "But I never put much stock in gossip."

Her mouth curved. "Thank goodness. I wouldn't want you to think worse of me than you already do."

"Do you need assistance mounting?" The deliberate change of subject was not lost on Scarlett, but she decided to let it slide.

For now.

"Yes please." Dusting off her jacket the best she could she waited for Owen to bring Fancy around. He held the mare's reins in one hand and lifted her right leg with the other. On the count of three he boosted her effortlessly into the saddle, but instead of letting her go as

soon as she was settled in the tack his hand began to travel slowly up the back of her calf, sliding under her heavy riding skirt to the delicate silk stocking beneath.

Scarlett's breath hitched, her eyelids growing heavy when he passed her knee and slid up her thigh, stroking his thumb across her bare flesh. He went higher still, caressing her hip before his fingers delved between her thighs. When he touched the blonde curls nestled above her damp sex she moaned and arched her back, all but purring with pleasure.

"Soft," he murmured. "You always did have the softest skin. And the hardest heart."

Her eyes flew open to find him glaring up at her, his countenance torn between loathing and desire. "Owen I—"

"You've always been my greatest weakness. Did you know that?" He gave a disgusted shake of his head before he slid his arm out from beneath her skirt and stepped back. "Leave, Scarlett. Please leave before I say or do something I will truly regret."

Taking him at his word, she silently gathered up her reins and dug her heels into Fancy's sides. Eager to be moving again the chestnut mare bounded forward with an excited toss of her head.

But even as she left Owen behind, Scarlett was already thinking of when they would see each other again and what she would do when they did. For now that she knew the effect she still had on him, it was only a matter of time before she seduced him into her bed... and found a way back into his heart.

“ANNE, PLEASE PUT THAT DOWN. HENRY, DO *not* CLIMB ON THAT! Oh for heaven’s sake,” Felicity cried in exasperation as she leaped forward and caught a vase just as it began to topple off the bookshelf her six-year-old son was dangling from. “Outside,” she ordered, pointing at the door. “Nanny will get you dressed.”

Anne’s little mouth fell open. “But—”

“No,” Felicity said with a firm shake of her head. “No ‘buts’ or ‘ands’ or ‘ifs’. You are going outside, and that is final.”

Henry snickered. “You said butts!”

“There are two different kinds of – never mind. Darcy, can you please be a dear and take the children? Hats and cloaks, I think. It is still a bit chilly and I do not want them to catch a cold.”

“But o’course, me lady.” Her Irish accent rolling off her tongue, Felicity’s nanny hurried forward and clapped her hands to get the children’s attention. Darcy may have been a young woman of only sixteen with a spattering of freckles that made her appear even younger, but she had a way with children that went well beyond her years. “Come along, Master Henry and Lady Anne. Give your blessed mother some peace and quiet.”

‘*Thank you*’ Felicity mouthed as her two little hellions were led away. She waited in the parlor until she heard the front door close and then it was a mad dash up the stairs and into her bedchamber for, as Darcy had so eloquently put it, some blessed peace and quiet.

Felicity loved her children. There was nothing in the world more important, and without them she did not know how she would have gotten through her very public and very humiliating divorce. But

there were times – like this morning – when she wanted to wring their beautiful little necks.

Crossing to her writing desk, she sat down in a large velvet chair and picked up her goose feather quill. Tapping it thoughtfully against the side of her cheek for a few moments before dipping it in the inkwell, she crafted a short letter to her mother letting her know that things were ‘going splendidly’ and there was ‘no cause for concern’ and that she would visit ‘very, very soon’.

All lies, of course.

Things were *not* going splendidly and there *was* a great cause for concern and she *wouldn’t* be visiting anytime in the near future, but she saw no reason to worry her mother.

Finishing the letter with her customary signature, she blew across the paper to dry the ink before folding it into a neat square and tucking the square inside an envelope. When a quick search of her desk did not turn up a wax seal she went to look for one in Scarlett’s room.

With her thoughts on other things and her head bowed, she did not immediately see the man crouching in front of the dresser. Since his back was to her and the sound of her steps were muffled by the thick rug he did not see her either. In fact, neither one of them saw the other until they were practically right on top of each other.

“Oh! I am terribly sorry,” Felicity exclaimed. “I did not realize Lady Sherwood’s bedchamber was still being cleaned... You’re not a servant!” By the time she realized the stranger staring up at her with the most arresting pair of amber eyes she’d ever seen was not, in fact,

a member of the staff it was too late. With uncanny speed he had a hand over her mouth and an arm wrapped around her narrow ribcage before she could so much as utter a scream.

“Easy love,” he murmured, his breath tickling her ear as he held her snug against his chest. “No one has to get hurt. Ye weren’t about to yell for help, were ye?”

Tears gathered in the corners of Felicity’s eyes as she shook her head from side to side.

“That’s what I thought. So here’s what we’re going to do, love. Are ye listening?”

She nodded.

“That’s a bright lass. Now I’m going to slowly remove my hand and then you’re going to go sit on that chair in the corner. Do ye see it? Good,” he purred when she nodded again. “You’re not going to scream or try to run or cause a fuss. Are ye love?”

“No,” Felicity gasped when he loosened the hand covering her mouth. “I’ll be quiet. I promise. But my children –”

“Are outside with their nanny. Go on, then.” He gave her a not-so-gentle push and she stumbled forward, catching herself on one of the bedposts. For a second she considered making a run for the door. It was so temptingly close. Only a few feet at most. But the stranger must have been able to read her mind because his eyes suddenly narrowed and he pointed directly at the chair. “Sit,” he said, commanding her as if she were a dog. “Now.”

With her heartbeat thrumming in her ears Felicity hurried to do as he asked, not wanting to incite his anger. Drying her tears with the

cuff of her spencer jacket, she forced herself to take several deep, even breaths. Falling into hysteria wouldn't help her children. For their sake – and her own – she needed to keep a calm, level head. Who knew when they might return inside, or what this horrible man would do to them if they did?

To look at him one would not immediately think he was horrible. He was of medium height and build with brown hair that held just the tiniest curl and long sideburns that extended all the way down to a narrow chin. There was nothing very distinguishing about his features, save a bulge in his nose that hinted at violence and those vivid eyes that were the color of warm gold. But then Felicity knew better than most that men had a way of hiding their deepest, darkest selves behind a charming smile and a charismatic demeanor.

As she watched him move from Scarlett's dresser to her large jewelry box, she was reminded of a fox. Sly, cunning, and sleekly handsome.

Bold as you please he pried open the lid and began sifting through the dozens of glittering necklaces, bracelets, and earrings, all of which were worth a considerable fortune.

Scarlett was going to be *so* angry.

"You're a thief then," said Felicity.

"I used to be," he replied cheerfully even as he picked up an emerald hair comb, whistled under his breath, and tucked it into the pocket of his jacket. "Now I am more of a... *connoisseur* of fine things."

"That is the same thing as a thief!" she cried indignantly.

“Is it?” His head canted to the side as he thought it over before he shrugged and lifted up a long string of pearls. “I suppose it is.” Biting down lightly on one of the pearls he shook his head and dropped them onto the floor where they coiled around his boot like an ivory snake. “I never take anything from people who cannot afford to lose it.”

“That does not make it right.”

“Ah,” he said, lifting a finger. “But does it make it completely wrong?”

“Yes! Yes, it does.”

“Well, to each their own I suppose.” A gold ring followed the emerald hair comb into his pocket before his eyebrows shot up. “What have we here?” Digging to the bottom of the jewelry box he closed his fist around something and pulled it out. Holding his hand flat, he uncurled his fingers one at a time to reveal a large sapphire earring surrounded by tiny diamonds.

“Do ye recognize this?” he asked.

Felicity gave the earring only the most cursory of glances before she turned her head to the side and looked deliberately at the far wall. “I am not helping you.”

He approached her with slow, catlike strides. Taking her chin between his thumb and pointer finger he steadily applied pressure until she had no choice but to look up. When she finally met his hard amber gaze she sucked in a startled breath, stunned by the transformation that had taken place.

Gone was the affable rake with the charming grin. In his place stood a cold-eyed criminal with a stare so fierce it sent chills racing

down her spine.

“I’ll ask ye one more time, love.” His silky voice slid across her skin like fingertips, lifting the downy hairs on the nape of her neck as she shuddered with fear. “Have ye seen this earring before?”

“I – I am not certain.” Tears sprang to her eyes. “Why does it matter? Don’t!” she gasped when he suddenly reached for her face, but instead of striking her he used his thumb to catch a tear trembling on the edge of her lash.

“Don’t cry,” he said gruffly as his gaze inexplicably softened. “I’m not going to hurt ye.”

“Why – why would I believe a thief?”

“Because I’m no’ a thief.” And just like that his cocky grin was back. “I’m a connoisseur of fine things.” He released his grip on her chin and gave a rueful shake of his head. “I always did have a soft spot for the pretty ones and you’re prettier than most. What’s your name, love?”

“F-Felicity Atwood,” she whispered. After the divorce she had decided to return to her maiden name, wanting no link to exist between herself and Ezra aside from their children. Children he no longer claimed as his own even though little Anne, with her dark hair and big hazel eyes, was his spitting image.

“Is there a Mr. Atwood I should be concerned about?” The wicked gleam in his eyes caused Felicity’s breath to catch yet again, although this time it was for an entirely different reason. When he looked at her like that she felt warm all over, as if she’d suddenly stepped into a pool of sunlight. Which did not make any sense give her present set of

circumstances. She should have felt terrified, not tingly! And part of her *was* still very much afraid, but there was another part that was intrigued by the thief with the golden eyes and the devilish grin and the soft spot in his heart for a woman's tears.

"No," she murmured, forcing herself to look away from his intoxicating gaze. Surely she had enough problems without adding a criminal to the mix. No matter how handsome and charismatic he may have been. "I am not married."

At least not any longer.

"Then it is truly a pleasure to make your acquaintance." As if they were meeting in a fancy ballroom he bent at the waist in an exaggerated bow complete with an arm flourish. "I'm Felix. Felix Spencer. Now I have to ask you again, love – have you seen this before?" Going back to the dresser he picked up the sapphire earring and held it up.

"Yes," she admitted after a pause. "Yes I have."

Scarlett had worn the earring when she'd married Rodger. It was the first – and the only – time Felicity had ever seen it aside from today.

"Then ye are certain this earring belongs to Lady Sherwood?" Tossing the earring high in the air he caught it with an easy flick of his wrist.

"Yes, of course." She gave him a pointed look. "That *is* her jewelry box you are rifling through."

"So it is," he said with a sly grin. "When was the last time ye saw her wear it?"

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Just answer the question love.” He rolled the earring across his knuckles. “When did ye last see Lady Sherwood with this fancy bit of blue dangling from her ear?”

Felicity folded her hands neatly in her lap. “I am not answering your question until you answer mine. What is so special about that particular earring? Why do you want to know when Scarlett wore it?” Her eyes narrowed. “This would not have anything to do with Captain Steel, would it?”

Though she hadn’t done it on purpose, Felicity had overheard enough bits and pieces of Scarlett and Owen’s conversation in the parlor to know that Rodger’s death was being investigated as a murder... and Owen considered Scarlett to be a suspect.

“Are you a Runner as well?” she pressed. “What do you want with Scarlett? She hasn’t done anything, you know.”

“It’s not what *I* want.” Felix slipped the earring into his pocket. “It’s what *he* wants.”

“You mean Captain Steel? That is who you are referring to, is it not?”

“I am sure I don’t have any idea what ye are talking about love.” They both froze when the sound of voices rose up from the foyer. “Time to leave.”

Finally, thought Felicity as she breathed a quiet sigh of relief. But when Felix went to the window and threw it open her relief quickly turned to alarm. “You cannot go out that way!” she gasped, jumping up out of her chair. “We are on the second floor! You’ll kill yourself.”

Felix's teeth flashed in a wicked grin as he looked back at her over his shoulder. "Worried about me, love?"

"No. Yes. No." Flustered, she wrung her hands together. "There is – there is a beautiful patch of azaleas outside that window and I don't want you to ruin them."

"Best give me a kiss for good luck then."

"What?" Her cheeks paled. "No! That isn't–"

But before she could finish her protest Felix had yanked her against his body and pressed his mouth to hers in a kiss that made her see stars.

It only lasted a few seconds. Three at the most. Yet when it was finished Felicity felt as if she'd been kissed for hours. Stumbling back a step she pressed a finger to her lips and watched dazedly as Felix climbed up onto the windowsill, perching on the narrow ledge with the balance of a cat.

"Until next time, love."

"Wait!" she cried.

But with a wink and an arrogant tilt of his chin he disappeared.

Her heart in her throat Felicity ran across the room, terrified of what she would see when she looked down. Summoning her courage – and bracing herself for the worse – she peered out the window.

The azaleas were untouched... and Felix was gone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?”

Scarlett paused in the middle of stepping out of her riding habit as Felicity burst into her dressing room without so much as a knock. She looked disheveled, her usually tidy coiffure askew and her skirt wrinkled as if she'd been gathering it in her fists.

“I was out for my morning ride. What's wrong with your hair?”

Felicity tucked a loose curl behind her ear. “I – I must speak with you in private,” she said with a furtive glance at Ruth. The maid was waiting beside the vanity table for Scarlett to finish undressing so she could help her into a dark blue muslin gown that was impossible to button without assistance. “It is very important.”

“I will be downstairs if you need me, my lady.” Carefully laying the dress down on a chaise lounge so as not to wrinkle it, Ruth hurried out of the room and quietly closed the door behind her.

“That was quite rude.” Scarlett turned towards Felicity with a frown. “Ruth is my closest confidant. Anything you have to say in front of me you can say in front of her.”

A grimace flitted across Felicity's already distressed countenance and Scarlett immediately felt a twinge of guilt at her thoughtless

choice of words. Not so long ago it was *Felicity* who had been her closest confidant. She really needed to work on thinking before she spoke.

“Not to say I cannot confide in you as well,” she amended hastily. “Because I can and I have and – oh bollocks.” Waving her hand in the air she fell back onto a feather stuffed sofa and propped her feet up on a square leather ottoman. “You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I suppose I do. Do you mind if I...” *Felicity* gestured at an empty chair.

“Of course,” *Scarlett* said even as she bit back the urge to grind her teeth. If this awkward formality between them ended tomorrow it would not be soon enough. “Sit wherever you like.”

“Thank you.” Sinking gracefully into the high backed chair, *Felicity* neatly arranged her skirts so they folded to one side before she lifted her head. “Have you – good heavens!” she exclaimed, her eyes widening with alarm as she got her first good look at *Scarlett* since rushing into her dressing room. “Never mind *my* hair, what happened to yours?”

“Oh, that.” *Scarlett*’s hand drifted to the nape of her neck where her bedraggled curls hung in a limp knot. “I fell off *Fancy*.”

“You *fell*? Are you all right? Do you need to see a doctor?”

“Yes, yes, and no.” As she had with *Owen*, she waved off *Felicity*’s concerns with an impatient flutter of her hand. “I suffered a bump to the head and my hands are a bit scraped up. I can assure you that it looks worse than it is.”

“Are you certain? Because–”

“I am fine,” she said firmly. “Honestly. Now what were you about to ask me?”

Felicity still did not look very convinced, but she let the matter drop. “Very well. Have you – have you happened to look in your jewelry box since you returned?”

Scarlett’s brow creased. What a terribly odd question for Felicity to ask. And why did she suddenly look so nervous? “My jewelry box? No, I haven’t. I never wear jewelry when I ride. Why would you... Oh,” she said as understanding dawned. “Did one of the children take something? Because if they did there is no harm done. Truly. I know how they can be.”

Felicity spine stiffened. “And how is that, precisely?”

“Well they’re not exactly meek little things, are they?” she said with a light laugh that Felicity did not return.

“I had no idea you found my children so burdensome.”

“That isn’t what I said at all!” Scarlett protested. “You know I am very fond of Henry and Anne.” *Even though they have been running amok since they got here.*

The little devils had gotten into *everything*. The curiosity cabinet in the library. Rodger’s study. The cupboard filled with sweets in the kitchen. Why, two days ago one of the footmen had carried Henry into the house soaking wet and naked as the day he was born! He’d caught him swimming in the pond, trying to catch one of the ducks. It was a miracle Henry had not caught a cold instead.

“The children would never enter your bedchamber without asking,” Felicity said, “let alone open your jewelry box.”

“Then why ask about it?”

“Because shortly after you left this morning for your ride, I came in here to borrow a pot of ink and I saw a man going through your dresser.”

“There was a *man* going through my dresser? Who?” Scarlett demanded. “Who was he?”

“I had never seen him before. He – he said his name was Felix.” A dull blush fanned upwards from her chest and flooded Felicity’s cheeks. “He went through your jewelry box and took a comb, and a necklace, and a–”

Scarlett did not wait for her to finish. Springing up off the sofa she dashed into her bedchamber. When she saw the lid to her jewelry box was open and her precious jewelry was scattered all about she stopped short, her gaze darting around the room as if she might catch a glimpse of the thief still lurking in a corner. But of course he was long gone, the only evidence of his ever being there at all in the glittering necklaces and bracelets and earrings thrown carelessly about. She whirled around. Through the large archway separating the two room she could see Felicity had slumped forward in her chair, a rather dazed look on her face. A trickle of alarm raced down her spine.

“Were you hurt? Did he hurt you? Felicity! Answer me.”

“What? No, no.” Blinking, Felicity sat back up. “Felix did not hurt me. He – he kissed me,” she admitted, her blush intensifying.

“The thief *kissed* you?” And here Scarlett thought *her* morning had been the more exciting one!

“Yes, although I do not believe he was a thief. Not the regular sort,

anyways.”

Scarlett blinked. “He broke into my bedchamber and stole my jewelry. I believe that is the very definition. Kiss or no kiss, the man is a thief. Was he at least handsome?”

Her gaze dropping to her lap, Felicity’s mouth curved in a shy smile. “Exceedingly so.”

“Did you see him take anything else?”

“An earring.” She looked up. “The sapphire one you wore at your wedding. With the tiny diamonds. He seemed *very* interested in it. He wanted to know for certain if it was yours, and when was the last time you’d worn it.”

Scarlett’s brow creased. “What a terribly odd thing for him to ask.”

“That is what I thought as well.” Suddenly unable to look her in the eye, Felicity glanced down and began to fidget with a pleat on her skirt. “I accidentally overheard you and Captain Steel arguing in the parlor yesterday. I know... I know what he is accusing you of and I suspect... well, I suspect that Felix was sent here to look for evidence.”

“That son of a bitch,” she hissed under her breath.

“Felix?” Felicity said, startled.

“No. *Owen*.” So *that* was why he’d met her on the road this morning. It had not been a coincidence at all, but a clever plan to keep her busy while his – his *thug* went through her things! No wonder he’d looked so surprised when she mentioned Felicity was staying with her. He’d thought no one would be in the house except for the servants.

Grinding her teeth, Scarlett began to pace back and forth along the narrow runner between her bedchamber and dressing room. “What the devil did he think Felix would find? A letter admitting my guilt? Honestly!” She threw her hands up in the air. “There is no proof that Rodger was even murdered, let alone that I did it! Owen is doing this to get back at me for what I did to him all those years ago. I know it.”

Had *everything* from this morning been a lie?

The heated glances.

The searing kiss.

The fiery passion.

No.

She refused to believe it. Maybe some things had been feigned (which she should have known the second he called her Lettie) but not everything.

The kiss had been real.

She was willing to stake her life on it.

Which I may end up doing if I am charged with murder.

Uncertainty sat like a heavy boulder in her stomach. Until this moment she hadn’t really thought Owen was serious with his accusations. An excuse to get close to her, nothing more. But now she wasn’t so sure.

While women were rarely brought before the House of Lords, it was not unheard of. Why, just last year Lady Hamburg had been accused of treason against the crown. She was eventually found innocent of any wrongdoing, but not before her reputation had been completely torn asunder and she’d been forced to flee England. To this day no one

knew what had happened to her, or where she had ended up.

“Do you think I did it?” Scarlett asked in a small, tentative voice, her anger draining away as she imagined herself standing in a room filled with stern-faced men in powdered white wigs. “Do you think I killed him?”

“Do I think you killed Rodger?” In an instant Felicity was out of her chair and across the room. Without asking she brought her arms around Scarlett and drew her close. “Of course not,” she murmured. “That is ridiculous. And if Owen were not blinded by the past, he would think it was ridiculous as well.”

“Maybe I deserve this. For what I did to him.”

“No. No one ever deserves to be wrongly accused of anything.” She began to stroke Scarlett’s back; a mother comforting her distraught child. “I will not lie and say what you did to Owen was right, because it wasn’t. But you are not the same person you were. Even I can see that.”

Had she changed for the better? Sometimes she felt as if she had; other times she wasn’t so certain.

“Owen kissed me this morning.”

Felicity’s hand stilled. “Owen *kissed* you? Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“Things between us have been... different. I did not know if you would care to hear about it.”

“Do not be ridiculous!” Gripping Scarlett’s shoulders, Felicity gave her the tiniest of shakes. “I know things between us have been strained, but you are still my dearest friend in the entire world. Of

course I would want to know if Owen kissed you.”

Scarlett felt her bottom lip tremble. “Even after the horrible way I treated you?” she whispered.

“Even after that,” Felicity said firmly. “Now tell me everything. When did it happen? This morning?”

“Yes, on my ride. We were together when I fell and he... well, he saved my life.” There was really no other way to put it. “Fancy spooked and my foot caught in the stirrup. Owen freed me and whisked me away to safety. Then he kissed me.” Her cheeks heated. “Quite thoroughly.”

“How romantic,” Felicity sighed.

“Yes, if you leave off the part where he thinks I murdered my husband.”

“Well nothing’s perfect.” She studied Scarlett’s face. “How was it? The kiss, I mean.”

Now it was Scarlett’s turn to sigh. “Just like it was before, but even better. Does that make sense?”

“It does.” Felicity took her hands and squeezed tight “There, you see? Everything will turn out all right.”

As she gazed upon her friend’s earnest expression, Scarlett felt the years between them melt away until they were as they had always been: sisters in every way except for blood.

“Thank you. I needed to hear that. I... I still love him, you know. Part of me always has.”

“I know,” Felicity said simply. “I know.”

SCARLETT'S MOTHER CAME TO CALL THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON. She marched into the house and made herself at home in the parlor without an invitation. Not because she was trying to be rude, but because it never crossed her mind that she would ever need to be invited into her daughter's home.

The years – and the expensive creams she still slathered on her face day and night – had been very kind to Lady Edgecombe. Her hair may have held a few more traces of silver and fine lines were beginning to creep along the edges of her mouth and eyes, but to look at her one would never guess she was closer to sixty than she was to forty. As befitted a family member in mourning she wore all black, from the lace cap on top of her impeccably styled curls to the satin shoes peeking out from beneath the hem of her dress.

“Mother, what are you doing here?” Scarlett said by way of greeting as she stepped into the parlor and saw that her mother had already had one of the maids bring her a cup of tea and a platter of cucumber sandwiches.

“I came to see you, of course. Have a seat, darling.” Gesturing to the empty chair with an elegant sweep of her hand as if she were inviting Scarlett into *her* parlor instead of the other way around, Lady Edgecombe took a tiny bite of a sandwich before delicately dabbing at the corners of her mouth with a silk napkin. “How are you sleeping? You look dreadful. Of course that is only to be expected given the gravity of your terrible loss. Still, you might do something about your hair.”

Scarlett sat directly across from her mother and shoved an entire

cucumber sandwich into her mouth to stop herself from saying something she really ought not to. She knew her mother did not *mean* to be insulting, but that did not make her thinly veiled criticisms any easier to bear.

“Thank you for checking up on me,” she said in a tone that miraculously bordered on the civil. Her relationship with her parents – and her mother in particular – had been strained for as long as she could remember. While they were always unfailingly cordial to one another, that was where their affection ended. Scarlett knew she was a disappointment to them for not marrying higher up on the social ladder, and she resented them for raising her more like a prized show pony than a daughter.

“Think nothing of it.” Lady Edgecombe gave another flick of her hand. “I have been worried about you darling, out here in the countryside all by yourself. Aren’t you terribly lonely?”

Scarlett shook her head. “After so much time spent in London I have found the solitude and the quiet to be just what I needed. Although I am not completely alone. Felicity is staying with me.”

Lady Edgecombe’s gaze sharpened. “Lady Ashburn is staying here? But... but she’s *divorced*.” Her voice lowered to a whisper as if she were uttering a terrible curse word.

“Yes, I know. That is why I have invited her and her children to remain here for as long as they need.” Seeing her mother’s resulting expression, Scarlett struggled not to roll her eyes. “Felicity wasn’t the one who wanted the divorce, Mother. Her husband initiated everything. It was his decision.”

“Still...” She made a *tsking* sound. “One does not leave their husband, no matter the reason.”

“I don’t believe Felicity had much choice in the matter.”

“We always have a choice, darling.”

Before she said something she regretted, Scarlett abruptly changed the subject. “How is Father? And Aunt Muriel? Is her leg still paining her?”

“Your father is fine. Aunt Muriel is fine. Everyone is fine. The house is nearly packed and we’ll be leaving for Hampshire at the end of the month.” Her parent’s country estate was – thankfully – a two days ride to the east; three if by carriage. While the distance did not eliminate unexpected visits completely, it certainly limited them. Yet another reason why Scarlett preferred living in the country.

“If you’re leaving for Hampshire at the end of the month, what are you doing here?”

“Why, I wanted to come see my daughter.” Lady Edgecombe arched a lofty brow. “Do I need a reason other than that? I will only be staying for a few days.”

Scarlett blanched. With everything else going on, the last thing she needed was her mother as a houseguest! “A few days? But–”

“Everyone has been asking about you,” she interrupted smoothly. “They wanted me to give you their prayers and condolences. I told them you are still recovering from the shock of it all. Nothing can be done this Season, of course, but by the next I expect you to be the absolute talk of the town.” Spooning a lump of sugar into her tea, she paused to stir it precisely four and a half turns before raising it to her

mouth and taking a sip. “There will be younger girls, there always are, but none with your beauty or grace. Word has it the Duke of Tinsley will be back on the market. If you’ll remember his wife died in childbirth a few months ago. Poor thing. She never was in very good health. He’s an avid outdoorsmen, you know. I think you two would make a splendid match. And you’ll both be coming out of mourning at the same time!”

“Mother, *stop it.*” Scarlett stared at her in disbelief. “Rodger is barely two months in the grave and you are already picking out my next husband? That is absurd.”

“What?” Lady Edgecombe blinked innocently and set her cup down with nary a clatter. “I am only looking after your best interests, dear. Yes, it is very sad Rodger passed away, but just think of what a second chance this will be for you! Rodger was all well and good, but he *was* only a viscount. This time around your aim should be much higher.”

“Rodger was never ‘well and good’, Mother. Surely you know that.”

Lady Edgecombe frowned. “I suspected you had your issues—”

“Issues,” Scarlett muttered under her breath. “That is one way to put it.”

“—but every couple does. Why, look at me and your father. We have had our ups and downs but we’ve made it work. Had Rodger lived I am confident you would have done the same.”

“Rodger was a brute and a bully and I wish I had never married him.” Scarlett’s breath exhaled in a loud *whoosh* as she felt a weight lift from her shoulders. After keeping the truth buried inside for so long, it was refreshing to be able to say it out loud. To give a voice to

the feelings she'd kept hidden behind calculated smiles and carefully timed laughs. To admit that even though it had gleamed on the outside like a silver shilling, her marriage had *not* been perfect and she had *not* been happy.

"Careful, darling." Although Lady Edgecombe's tone was pleasant, her smile was as sharp as the edge of a knife. "It does no one any good to speak ill of the dead. Particularly when the dead have been murdered."

The weight that had just lifted off Scarlett's shoulders returned tenfold. So great was her shock that had she been holding a cup of tea it surely would have shattered on the ground. "What – what are you talking about?"

"That is very good." Her mother nodded approvingly. "If anyone asks, that is precisely how you should respond. Oh, don't look at me like that. You did not think it would stay a secret forever, did you?"

"I..." Scarlett's throat locked up. For once, she was at a complete loss of words.

"It is only conjecture and gossip at this point, of course. But still, people are beginning to whisper." Lady Edgecombe's mouth thinned. "You know how I *detest* whispering."

"What – what are they saying?" At least now she knew the real reason her mother was here.

"There is a rumor that Bow Street is looking into Rodger's death. Which of course they would not be doing unless foul play was involved. Murder." She shook her head. "Can you *imagine*? Who in heaven's name would want Rodger dead? It's absolutely ludicrous if

you ask me, but then most gossip is. Still, I thought it would be best if I forewarned you. Not that anyone would dare bring it up in your presence given that you are his grieving widow.” She enunciated the word ‘grieving’ with a deliberate glance down at Scarlett’s dark blue dress. “Honestly darling, you really should be wearing black. And where is your veil? It showed off your cheek bones to perfection.”

Were the situation not so dire Scarlett would have laughed. Trust her mother to be more concerned with her cheekbones than a murder.

“I must have lost it,” she murmured absently as her mind raced. So Owen had not yet condemned her publicly... but if he thought he’d found the evidence he needed it would only be a matter of time. She needed to convince him of her innocence and she needed to do it quickly, for the only thing worse than a trial before the House of Lords would be a trial before her peers. She could just see it now, splashed over the front page of every gossip column in London:

‘GRIEVING WIDOW OR COLD-BLOODED MURDERER?’

‘THE SOCIALITE KILLER’

‘LADY MURDERESS’

Admittedly, the last title *did* have a bit of a ring to it.

“Mother, I have to go.” She stood up.

“Go? But I’ve only just arrived. I thought we would have tea and then go through your ward—”

“Tomorrow,” she interrupted. “We can do all of that bright and early tomorrow morning.”

Lady Edgecombe’s mouth pinched. “Not *too* early. You know morning sunlight is not good for my complexion.”

“Yes, I know. Ruth will escort you to your room and help you unpack.” Walking to the door, she gave the bell rope a light tug. “If there is anything else you need you have only to ask her. I will be back in time for dinner.”

“Where are you going?”

“To see an old friend.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE NEAREST VILLAGE WAS ONLY A SHORT CARRIAGE RIDE AWAY. Even smaller than Blooming Glen where Scarlett and Owen had first met, it was comprised of a tiny square and a handful of shops, the majority of which were only just reopening after a long, stagnant winter.

Adjusting the brim of her balloon bonnet – sans veil – Scarlett walked briskly down the street, neatly sidestepping a pile of manure. Owen had not told her where he was staying, but given there was only one inn within a twenty mile radius it was not difficult to hazard a guess.

The Silver Lion was a tidily kept establishment with a pub below and rooms above. The exterior was yellow with gray trim – hence the name – and although there were long, snaking cracks in the plaster and a large patch on the slate roof, it was apparent from the sparkling windows and neatly swept walkway that the inn was well cared for.

She heard the jingle of a bell as she pushed open the door, but at first glance there was no one about, not even a tavern maid. Wooden floorboards creaked beneath her feet as she approached the long bar. It was damp and smelled faintly of lemon and beeswax, indicating it

had recently been scrubbed. Resting her gloved hands lightly on the curved edge she stood up on her toes and peered over the other side – just as an older man holding a wooden crate filled with drinking glasses popped up.

“Oh!” Scarlett cried in surprise.

“Bloody ‘ell!” the man shouted.

The crate went up and then came down with a resounding crash so loud Scarlett covered her ears.

“I am so terribly sorry,” she gasped. Shards of glass were everywhere. It did not appear as if a single cup had been spared. “I did not mean to startle you.”

“Then what the ‘ell were ye doing?” the man demanded, his upper lip curling in anger before he dropped to his knees and started to pick up pieces of glass. On the other side of the bar Scarlett began to do the same.

“I did not think anyone was here. I really am sorry. I’ll pay for every broken glass,” she offered.

“Damn right ye will,” he snorted. “What were ye doin’ here in the first place, lass? We dinna open for another five hours.”

Sitting back on her heels, Scarlett drew a hand across her brow as she recalled the last time she’d heard the thick, rolling burr of a Scotsman. It had been in a room far smaller than this one with a rickety old table that had a book wedged beneath one of the legs to keep it level. The table had been sparsely set, the porcelain plates mismatched and dull from too many washings, the cabbage soup sitting in the middle of the table hardly enough for one person, let

alone four. But that had not stopped Owen's mother from immediately putting out another plate when she realized her son had invited a guest for dinner.

"And who is this?" Mrs. Steel had asked, her warm, weathered face and kind blue eyes so different from Lady Edgcombe's cold, judgmental stare.

"My friend that I told you about." Owen had slanted a sideways glance at Scarlett when he'd said the word 'friend' and she'd done her best not to giggle. "Lady Scarlett. Her parents are in London until next Tuesday so I thought it would be nice to have her over for dinner."

"That's a kind thought." The glimmer of amusement in Mrs. Steel's gaze had revealed she knew full well that Scarlett and Owen were likely more than just friends, but she'd made no mention of it. Instead she had gone to a battered looking china cabinet and taken out the very last plate. "I do hope you like cabbage soup, Lady Scarlett. I am afraid it's all we have."

"Please call me Scarlett. And I love cabbage soup. It's one of my favorite meals." It had been a lie, of course. Cabbage soup was a meal for the poor and the impoverished and she'd never once eaten it. But she had not wanted to hurt Mrs. Steel's feelings, nor had she noticed the quick frown Owen gave her as she sat down across from him.

"Mr. Steel will only be a moment – oh, here he is now."

Scarlett still remembered the pretty blush that had spread across Mrs. Steel's cheeks as her husband had entered the cramped flat. He'd been as tall as Owen was now, his dark auburn hair nearly touching the ceiling. Yet in spite of his size he'd had a quiet way about him,

reminding Scarlett of a gentle giant when he had taken his seat at the head of the table and led them in a quick prayer.

“Now,” he said after the prayer was finished, his brown eyes twinkling as his gaze darted between Owen and Scarlett. “Why dinna ye tell me who this pretty lass is and how it’s come about that she’s sitting at my table.”

“Don’t embarrass the boy,” Mrs. Steel chided. “This is his friend he met in the village. Her parents ordered all of those blueberry scones, if you’ll recall.”

“And does this friend have a name?” he asked as he tore off a piece of bread from the thick loaf he’d brought home with him. It was still steaming and the smell of it was enough to make Scarlett’s mouth water. Noting the direction of her stare Mr. Steel tore off a second piece and put it on her plate. “There ye go, lass. Straight from the oven. Ye won’t taste finer bread in all of Hampshire County.”

“Scarlett,” Owen muttered as his ears turned a dull red. “Her name is Scarlett.”

“Miss Scarlett,” Mr. Steel said with a nod. “It’s a pleasure tae meet ye. Any friend of my son’s is a friend of ours. Isn’t that right, Mrs. Steel?”

“It most certainly is. Would you care for some soup, dear?”

“Yes please.” Scarlett held out her bowl. Leaning across the table, Mrs. Steel carefully ladled out a large spoonful. The next serving, noticeably smaller than the first, went to her husband, and the third to her son. When it came time to fill her own bowl she was scraping the bottom of the pot and Scarlett felt a surge of guilt as she realized her

portion had been meant for Owen's mother.

It was all so different from what she was accustomed to. When she ate with her parents they sat so far apart that they rarely spoke, let alone served one another food. That task was left to the scullery maids. Her mother never set the table, nor cleaned up afterwards. And at the end of every meal there was enough food left over to last for the rest of the week, but it was thrown out and everything prepared fresh the next day.

Scarlett had known, of course, that she and Owen were from two different social classes. But she'd never really considered what that meant until this very moment. As she unconsciously compared their two vastly different upbringings she couldn't help but feel a trickle of unease.

Was this the sort of future that awaited her when she and Owen ran off together? A tiny flat with barely enough room for a table. No servants. The same watered down soup night after night. She bit her lip as her gaze flitted down, only to abruptly look up when she felt Owen nudge her foot from beneath the table.

"My mother wants to know what you think of the soup." He was watching her closely, an odd, almost defiant expression on his face.

"It's delicious," she said quickly. "The best cabbage soup I've ever eaten."

Mrs. Steel's face flushed with pleasure. "What a fine compliment to be given. Tell me Scarlett, do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"No, it is just me."

"What about your parents?" asked Mr. Steel.

“They’re in London for the opening of a new art exhibit.” She had asked to accompany them, but as usual they’d insisted she remain behind. *We will be back by the end of the week*, her mother had promised. *I will take you shopping as soon as we return. Won’t you like that?*

Mr. Steel frowned with his spoon lifted halfway to his mouth. “They left ye all alone?”

“I have my governess.”

“And does this governess know where ye are?” he asked with a meaningful glance at his son.

“Not – not exactly.” She’d told Ruth she was having dinner with Felicity whose estate was all but across the road, making it the one place she could go without a chaperone. As long as she was back before dark Ruth would never be the wiser as to where she’d *really* been and who she had been with.

Mr. Steel grunted. “I suspected as much.”

“Oh, leave her alone,” Mrs. Steel interceded with a stern look at her husband. “They’re just children and it is not as if she’s run off. Have you, dear?”

Scarlett’s startled gaze swept to Owen. Did his parents somehow suspect what they’d planned last night when they were walking hand in hand beneath the stars? *No*, she assured herself when he gave a small shake of his head. Their secret was safe... for now. But what would happen when they returned from Gretna Green as husband and wife? Better yet, where would they live?

When Owen had asked her to elope with him he’d assured her they

would be able to stay with his parents until he saved up enough money for them to buy a little cottage in the country. It was one of the reasons he'd invited her for dinner. So she could meet his mother and father, and they could meet her. But all it took was one glance at her surroundings for Scarlett to know there wouldn't be enough room. Why, the entire flat was the size of her bedchamber! And what would she do all day while Owen was working and her friends were in London flitting from ballroom to ballroom? Surely he wouldn't expect her to *work*... would he?

What had seemed like a wonderful idea when her head was tucked on Owen's shoulder and her lips were still tingling from his kisses suddenly began to lose its appeal. As doubt sank its icy claws into her skin she looked away from Owen, her gaze dropping to her pitifully small bowl of cabbage soup.

Was this the life she wanted for herself? For the children they would have one day? She bit the inside of her cheek. What if her parents disowned her? Or her friends stopped speaking to her? Or – worst of all – they laughed at her?

But I love him, she reminded herself fiercely. *And we are meant to be together.*

Weren't they?

As if he could sense something was wrong Owen reached beneath the narrow table and touched her knee. She jumped ever-so-slightly, jostling her bowl.

"Are you all right dear?" Mrs. Steel asked.

"Fine," she said hastily. "I am fine. Although I just remembered that

I was supposed to be home half an hour ago. I – I would not want to make my governess worry.”

“But you’ve hardly touched your soup or your bread!” Owen’s mother made a clucking sound of disapproval. “Let me ready you some food to take home. I might even be able to sneak in a few scones,” she said with a wink.

“Oh no, that’s not—”

“It will only take a moment.” True to her word Mrs. Steel quickly wrapped up half a roll of bread and three large apricot scones. Putting them into a cloth satchel and handing the satchel to Owen, she gave Scarlett a quick hug. “It was a pleasure to meet you, my dear,” she said warmly, her blue eyes bright with affection. “Now I see why Owen has been so distracted lately.”

“Mother,” Owen muttered, turning his head to the side as his ears flushed with color.

“It’s true.” Mr. Steel squeezed his son’s shoulder. “Why, just yesterday the boy put blackberry filling in an apple pie.” He shook his head. “Head in the clouds, this one.”

Despite her trepidation, Scarlett could not help but smile. It was clear by the way they look at Owen that Mr. and Mrs. Steel were incredibly proud of their son. Had her own parents ever gazed at her with such adoration? She doubted it.

Lord and Lady Edgecombe were proud of their daughter the same way they were proud of their estate in the country and their house in town and their brand new carriage. Not because they held any great love or affection for those things, but because they were a sign of

wealth and fine breeding.

“Thank you for a lovely meal.” Impulsively she kissed Owen’s mother on the cheek. “It was a pleasure.”

“Please come back any time dear.”

“Aye, any time,” Mr. Steel echoed. “It was nice tae meet ye, lass.”

Mrs. Steel opened the door, admitting a warm draft of summer air that smelled of honeysuckle and fireflies. “Be careful walking home. And mind your manners,” she told Owen sternly, giving him a friendly swat on his backside as he followed Scarlett out.

They walked most of the way in silence, although Scarlett felt the heavy weight of Owen’s gaze upon her more than once. Yet it wasn’t until the lights from Edgecombe Manor were visible through the leafy bows of the trees that he took her arm and gently turned her to face him.

“What is it?” he murmured, his blue eyes intent as he searched her face. “What is the matter?”

A tiny branch snapped beneath Scarlett’s heel as she shifted her weight from side to side. “I was just thinking about what will happen when we return from Gretna Green.”

Confusion knitted Owen’s brow. “What do you mean?”

“Well, where will we live?”

“With my parents.” A dark lock of hair tumbled across his forehead as his head canted to the side. “I thought we talked about this last night.”

“Yes, but...” Her voice trailed away as she leaned back against the thick trunk of a gnarled oak. Golden light from the setting sun swept

across her slender frame, highlighting the blossoming curves beneath the thin fabric of her muslin dress. She plucked absently at a loose thread, winding the string around her fingertip until blood pooled in her nail.

“But?” he prompted.

Her shoulders lifted and fell in a helpless shrug. “But there is hardly any room, is there?”

“I know it will not be what you are used to,” he said earnestly, “but it will only be for a short while. When we save up enough money we’ll be able to buy a house of our own. Maybe we could even build one.”

“Perhaps,” she said, unconvinced. Owen was a baker, not a builder. What did he know about constructing a house? And where would they get the money for the land? Unless he was thinking of becoming a tenant farmer. The very thought was enough to make her shudder. To go from being an earl’s daughter to a tenant farmer’s wife... she would be a laughingstock!

“What about the London Season?” she asked, pulling the thread tighter.

“What about it?” He shoved his hair back with a scowl. “I thought you didn’t care about that.”

Neither did Scarlett... until she had begun to think about everything she would be giving up by missing it.

The fancy balls.

The beautiful gowns.

The nights at the theatre.

The elaborate dinner parties.

She thought she'd been ready to forsake all of those things to be with Owen.

Now she wasn't so sure.

"Maybe if we waited a year or two..."

"If we waited you would never come back to me," he said simply.

Her eyes widened. "Of course I would!" The thread on her skirt snapped as she leapt forward and threw her arms around Owen's neck. Burrowing her face in the familiar crook of his shoulder and her fingers in the rough folds of his jacket she murmured, "I love you."

She felt him stiffen, which only made her cling all the harder. "I love you," she repeated, tilting her head back. "Don't you believe me?" A mischievous grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. "I will prove it with kisses if I have to." Ignoring his frown – Owen was always frowning about something or another – she pressed her lips to his chin, then his cheek, then the tip of his nose.

"You missed a spot," he said gruffly.

"Did I?" She quirked a brow. "I cannot imagine where."

He pointed to his mouth. "Here."

"Ah, so I did..."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE BITTERSWEET MEMORY EVAPORATED when Scarlett picked up a piece of glass and accidentally cut her hand.

“Damn,” she hissed, clutching her wrist as she watched bright red blood spill across her palm. Carefully holding her arm away from her dress so as not to stain it, she stood up and peered back over the bar. *“Excuse me.”* She could see the old man’s brown cap bobbing up and down as he cleaned up the mess of broken glass, but he didn’t look up. *“Excuse me!”*

“What?” he barked.

“Do you have a clean cloth or a rag? I’ve cut myself.”

“Ye did what?”

“I’ve cut myself,” she repeated patiently even as blood began to drip onto the bar.

Heaving himself to his feet with a grunt and groan, the man glared down at her hand and then up at her face. His own countenance was so weathered and wrinkled it was almost impossible to guess his age. He had a slight stoop to his shoulders and a bulge in his gut, but his hazel eyes were as sharp as the glass that had sliced open her palm. *“You’re bleedin’ all over my bar, lass.”*

“Yes, I know.” Her head tilted to the side. *“A rag, if you please.”*

Grumbling, he disappeared again and popped back up a few seconds later holding a dirty looking towel that Scarlett wouldn't have used on her horse let alone herself. "Here," he said, slapping it down on the bar. "It's clean."

"I think our versions of cleanliness are vastly different." Her entire arm was beginning to throb. Gritting her teeth she said, "Could you please direct me to the nearest doctor?"

"Ye be wantin' a doctor for a little cut like that?" His bushy eyebrows shot up towards his cap. "Just wrap it up, lass, and be on your way. As I said we dinna open for another five hours."

Was the man daft? "Yes, I know. However I came here looking—"

"What's going on down here? Are you all right, Mac? I heard a crash."

"—for him," Scarlett finished as Owen descended the stairs and stopped short at the sight of her. He must have just gotten out of the bath, for his dark hair was damp and slicked back and his shirt was unbuttoned, revealing his muscular chest.

All of the pain in her hand was temporarily forgotten as her gaze followed the dark trail of hair from his abdomen down to the waistband of his trousers where it formed a V before disappearing. She felt a tingle between her thighs as she imagined running her fingers through the ebony forest of curls. Of following the trail down, down, down until she found his hard, pulsing length. Wickedly she wondered if *that* part of him had grown along with the rest of his body. Not that it had ever been small to begin with...

"What are *you* doing here?" Owen growled, effectively snapping

Scarlett out of her lust-induced trance.

“I...” She cleared her throat. Shook her head. “I came to speak to you.”

“Now is not a good – what happened to you?” Broken glass crunched beneath his boots as he stormed across the tavern and grabbed her arm. She tried to shake him loose, but his grip was unrelenting. “These needs to be cleaned and bandaged.”

“I know. That’s what I was trying to do but this *odious* man” – she wrinkled her nose at the barkeep – “was of no help.”

The old Scotsman lifted both of his hands. “I tried tae help her,” he said defensively. “I gave her a rag, didn’t I?”

“Yes, and if I wanted to die of an infection I would have used it!”

He blinked at her, then looked at Owen. “Do ye know this lass?”

“Regrettably yes.”

“She’s a bit of mouth on her, doesn’t she?” He rubbed his chin. “Quite bonny, though. The troublesome ones usually are.”

Scarlett’s eyes narrowed. “I’ll show you troublesome you bloody–”

“Easy,” Owen muttered in her ear as his grip on her arm tightened. “Mac doesn’t mean any harm. Come up to my room. You need to have that looked at. I have clean water and towels.”

He wanted her to go up to his room? Startled by the intimate proposition she met his gaze, but if he was planning to do anything other than tend to her wound it didn’t show itself in the cool depths of his cobalt stare.

Unfortunately.

“Fine,” she said.

Keeping a hold of her as if he didn't trust her not to leap over the bar and give Mac the sound thrashing he deserved, Owen led her up the staircase and down a narrow hallway to the very last door on the right.

Like the rest of the Silver Lion Inn, Owen's room was small but tidily kept with a bed on one wall and a wash basin on the other. There was a set of drawers in between and a chair that had seen better days in the corner. Nodding at the chair to indicate she should take a seat, Owen dumped the contents of the wash basin out the window before refilling it with clear, clean water from a metal pitcher. Wetting a beige towel he knelt down in front of her.

"Your hand," he said gruffly, not meeting her gaze.

Wordlessly Scarlett extended her arm and then watched, breath caught in her throat, as Owen cleaned her cut with remarkable gentleness. When all of the blood had been wiped away he bandaged her hand with a strip of cloth so quickly and efficiently that she knew it wasn't the first time he'd tended to a wound.

"You've done this before," she said softly.

"Yes." Tying off the bandage with a sturdy knot, he sat back on one knee. "More times than I care to remember."

Moved by the quiet pain she saw in his eyes when he lifted his head, Scarlett reached out and touched his cheek.

"I am sorry," she whispered.

"It isn't your fault." Except they both knew it was for if she had kept her word and run away with him to Gretna Green as she'd promised, he never would have gone to war.

“Owen, I—”

He stood up so quickly the edges of his shirt billowed out like the sails of a ship. Raking a hand through his hair, he stalked across the room to stare broodingly out the window at the street below. “How does your hand feel?”

Her mouth twisted in muted frustration. If he did not want her apology or her explanation, then what *did* he wanted? Vengeance? Retribution? Revenge? If he charged her with the murder of her husband he would have all three regardless of whether she was found innocent or guilty.

“Much better. Thank you. Owen, I came here to talk to you about Rodger.”

His shoulders tensed by he did not look away from the window. “What about him?”

“Well, to start with I know you sent a man to search through my things. I am going to want all of the jewelry he stole returned, by the way.”

“I am certain I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Scarlett’s hand that was not bandaged curled in a fist. She’d known he was going to make this as difficult as possible, but she hadn’t anticipated him outright *lying*. “Be that as it may, surely you must know that if Rodger really *was* murdered I had absolutely nothing to do with it.”

“I have a sapphire earring that says otherwise.”

“Ah *ha!*” she said triumphantly. “So you *did* send someone to steal my jewelry.”

He turned around. "Did you even realize that you'd lost it?"

"Lost what?"

"Your sapphire earring. It must have fallen when you were standing over your dead husband's body."

Scarlett gritted her teeth. "No matter what you think you found, I was at home all evening."

"Were you?" he countered softly. "I know about Sherwood's mistress, Lady Deveraux. He was with her that night, wasn't he? And you were finally fed up enough to follow him to her flat. You did not want to murder him by traditional means. That would draw too much attention. So instead, to make it seem like an accident, you sabotaged his horse's girth—"

"This is absolutely ridiculous."

"—and you followed him when he left. On his way back the saddle twisted and he fell from his horse, just like you'd planned. But of course you had to make certain he was really dead, so you went and checked his pulse. That's when you lost your earring."

"Are you quite done?" Scarlett said acidly.

Owen scratched his chin. "Yes, I think that about sums it up."

"Then it is your turn to listen to me. I did *not* have anything to do with Rodger's death. I did not follow him that night. I did not cut his horse's girth. Whatever earring you found, it is not mine!" Her hand curled around the edge of her seat. "I know I made a terrible mistake seven years ago and I regret what I did. I've regretted it every day since I married Rodger. But I was just a girl, Owen! A young, foolish, naïve girl who did not know any better."

“I thought how I was seen mattered. I thought the way I was dressed mattered. I thought the size of my house mattered. But it doesn’t. It never did. The only thing that mattered – the only thing that *matters* – is you. I love you Owen and I know you love me as well, you’re just too damned stubborn to admit it.”

He waited until she collapsed into silence to ask, “Is that all?”

Exhausted by the inner strength it had taken to lay her soul bare, Scarlett could only nod.

“Yes,” she whispered. “That is all.”

His cold gaze raked across her body with so much force she felt its frigid bite all the way on the other side of the room. “I do not believe a single bloody word out of your mouth. You’re a consummate actress. You always have been. Something I realized too late, I’m afraid. I know you murdered your husband and no amount of talking or telling me how much I *matter* is going to change my mind.”

“Oh!” she cried as she leaped out of her chair. “You are so stubborn it’s *infuriating*. Why can’t you just *listen* to me? *I did not murder Rodger!*”

“Listen to you?” he snarled. “I can hardly stand the sight of you.”

Pins flew out of her hair as she gave a defiant toss of her head. “You were singing a different tune this morning, weren’t you? Or was that another man’s tongue down my throat?”

His eyes narrowed. “I’m sure you’ve had so many it is a challenge keeping track.”

“Bastard,” she hissed.

“Does the truth hurt?” The mocking glint in his eyes made her want

to scratch them out. Had she *really* thought she would be able to seduce him into falling in love with her again? Owen may have desired her body, but it was clear to her now that he found every other part of her abhorrent. She'd been a fool to ever think otherwise.

"You wouldn't know the truth if it hit you upside the head!" Whirling around she snatched up the shawl she'd put on the back of the chair, but when she went to leave the room she found Owen blocking her path.

"Where do you think you're going?" he growled, more wild animal than man as he grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around, effectively pinning her between the door and his hard body. His bare chest lifted and fell with the force of his breaths, nostrils flaring as he caged her between his arms.

"As far away from *you* as I can possibly get." She slapped a hand against his chest and gave a hard shove, but she might as well have been trying to topple a brick wall. "Let me go, Owen."

"That's the problem." Damp tendrils of hair whipped across his forehead as he gave a frustrated shake of his head. "I can't."

He looked so miserable she almost felt sorry for him. Then she remembered why she was here and her pity turned to anger. She may have wronged him, but at least she had not accused him of something he had not done. If she were found guilty of murdering Rodger she could be put to *death*. Would Owen go so far in his revenge that he would see her hang? This morning she would have said absolutely not, but now... now she wasn't so certain.

"Well you are going to have to try." Her eyes were the tempestuous

gray of a stormy sky as she glared up at him. “You cannot have it both ways. You cannot hate me and want me.”

“You think I don’t know that?” The door shook on its hinges when he slammed his right hand against the wood. Scarlett flinched, instinctively ducking her head, and Owen, his expression stricken, immediately dropped both of his arms.

“Lettie,” he said hoarsely, reaching out for her. His fingertips grazed the nape of her neck as she spun around. “Lettie, I’m sorry. You know I would never hurt you. Please—”

Ignoring him, she yanked open the door and fled down the hall without looking back.

THE CREATURE WATCHED FROM THE SHADOWS as Scarlett burst out of the tavern. It watched as she stopped to compose herself, shaking out her skirts and readjusting her hat. It watched as she dashed at her cheeks. Then it followed, always keeping just out of sight, as she walked hastily down the street.

When, in her flustered state, she turned left instead of right and found herself at the end of an alley the creature tensed, its claws curling around the knife concealed inside of its pocket. The blade was so sharp that it sliced the creature’s thumb, but instead of hissing with pain it purred with pleasure.

It sucked on the tiny cut, enjoying the sweet taste of its own blood while it continued to watch.

Watching... watching... always watching.

Scarlett reached the end of the alleyway and turned around.

Now, a voice urged the creature. Do it now. Slice her open. Watch her bleed.

Now.

Now.

DO IT NOW.

The voice was screaming, but the creature was patient. It knew how to wait... and how to pretend.

“Oh!” Scarlett did a double take when the creature shoved the knife behind its back and stepped out of the shadows. “I did not expect to see you here.”

The creature hid its fangs behind a sympathetic smile. “Are you all right? You look like you’ve been crying.”

“It’s nothing. Just a meeting that did not go as I thought it would.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No, no.” Scarlett shook her head. “But it is very kind of you to offer. I am terribly sorry to rush off, but we’ll see each other soon.”

“Yes.” The creature’s fingers tightened around the knife. “Very soon.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

OWEN SPENT THE REST OF THE DAY CLOSETED AWAY IN HIS ROOM staring up at the ceiling. Occasionally he reached over to his bedside table for the bottle of brandy he'd brought with him from London. But no matter how hard or how long he looked, the cracked white plaster did not have the answers he sought.

Nor did the brandy.

I love you Owen and I know you love me as well, you're just too damned stubborn to admit it.

Scarlett was a good actress, but she wasn't *that* good. Her words had rung with truth and he was no longer convinced of her guilt, earring or no earring. If he was completely honest with himself, he never had been.

Someone had murdered Lord Sherwood. Of that he remained certain.

But it hadn't been Scarlett.

He'd come to Surrey seeking vengeance, not justice. By allowing bitterness and old hurts to drive his quest for the truth he had turned into a man he didn't recognize. A man who was cruel. A man who was violent. A man who acted out of spite, not reason. The expression on

Scarlett's face when he'd slammed his fist against the door... The sudden paleness of her cheeks... The fear in her eyes... It was not something he would soon be able to forget.

Nor should you, he told himself grimly.

After what he had said and done he *deserved* to feel terrible. He had intentionally and maliciously hurt the only woman he had ever loved... and to what end? To right old wrongs? To make himself feel better? Because as it stood he'd never felt worse.

After a restless night spent tossing and turning Owen rose out of bed, splashed cold water on his face, and pulled on the same brown trousers and white linen shirt he'd worn the day before. Forgoing a waistcoat and cravat he slipped into a loose fitting overcoat that concealed the pistol he carried on his hip. A black topper to cover his tousled hair and he was ready to depart.

Felix was waiting for him downstairs, already tucking into a hearty breakfast of sausage and eggs.

"Ye look like shit," he commented around a mouthful of pork.

Ignoring him, Owen walked straight out of the tavern and turned left towards the stables. His gelding was already saddled and waiting for him, but it wasn't a single horse he needed.

"Be a good lad and ready my carriage," he told the livery boy. "There's an extra shilling in it for you if you're quick about it."

It was an older carriage, the dark blue upholstery worn a bit threadbare in places, but it was a far cry above anything Owen could have afforded when Scarlett had spurned him in favor of a wealthy viscount.

The truth was his fortune had more than quadrupled over the past year after a few risky investments had paid out. No one – not Felix, not Grant, and certainly not Scarlett – knew how rich he really was. The one person who had an inkling was his sister Lydia and that was only because he'd just finished buying her a cozy cottage not too far from here. A cottage with six bedrooms, fifty acres of land, and an entire staff to wait on her hand and foot. After everything she had been through in her young life she deserved no less and it pleased him to be able to give her and his nephew whatever they desired.

“Yes sir!” The livery boy snapped to attention. “Right away, sir!”

Owen kept out of the way while a large bay mare was brought out and fitted with a harness. When the harness was attached to the carriage he gave the livery boy two shillings, for he remembered too well what it felt like to wear clothes that were too small and have an appetite that was too big.

His eyes as wide as the coins he'd just been given, the boy scampered away to show the other stable hands his good fortune while Owen climbed up into the carriage and snapped the reins. With single-minded determination he made his way towards Sherwood Manor.

SCARLETT POKED AT HER BUTTERED TOAST WITH HER FORK, but she did not have much an appetite. At the other end of the table where she was doing her best to keep her children from swinging on the chandelier like the little monkeys they were pretending to be, Felicity sighed.

“You have to eat *something*,” she said. “It will make you feel better.”

Scarlett lifted a wry brow. “I doubt food is going to help. Wine, on the other hand...”

“It is only ten o’clock in the morning, darling. Surely you can manage to wait until eleven.” Lady Edgecombe sailed into the breakfast room already dressed for the day in an elaborate black beaded gown with a matching bonnet and – much to Scarlett’s amusement – a short lace veil. If there was one thing her mother took seriously, it was her fashion. She would never dream of letting a little thing like a death in the family stop her from looking her best.

“Anne and Henry, come along please,” Felicity said after a quick glance at Lady Edgecombe. “Let’s go outside and visit the horses.”

“But I don’t *want* to go outside,” Henry said plaintively.

“I don’t want to go outside either,” Anne echoed even as she dashed into the foyer as fast as her chubby little legs could carry her, leaving Felicity with the arduous task of getting Henry to do something he did not want to do.

“You know in my day children were never allowed to disobey their elders.” As she watched Felicity try to peel Henry’s little hands off the windowsill he was clinging to with the strength of ten grown men, Lady Edgecombe gave a disapproving sniff. “A bit more discipline and a little less coddling, I should think.”

“Mother,” Scarlett said warningly.

“What? I am merely trying to be helpful.”

“Felicity does not need your help. And she doesn’t need to leave. You do not need to leave,” she repeated loudly. Felicity gave her an

appreciative smile over her shoulder, but continued trying to wrestle a very determined Henry away from the window.

“I think... it will... be better for... all involved if I take the children... elsewhere,” she gasped, red-faced and out of breath. When she finally managed to pry Henry off the sill she wasted no time in picking him up and hurrying out of the room, leaving Scarlett and her mother alone.

“What?” Lady Edgecombe said defensively when Scarlett glared at her. “I did not tell her she had to go.”

“No, but you might as well have. You’ve been making remarks since you arrived.”

“You know I do not care for children.”

Then why, Scarlett thought silently, did you have one?

“Be that as it may, this home is as much Felicity’s as it is mine. I would like you to respect that.”

“It is not going to belong to either one of you much longer.”

Scarlett sighed. “What are you implying, Mother?”

Spooning sugar into her coffee, Lady Edgecombe took a sip and spoke over the curved rim. “You know as well as I that this estate is soon to pass to Rodger’s closest living male heir. Then what will you do? Where will you go? Who will take care of you?”

She lifted her chin. “I am certain I will figure something out. And I do not need anyone to *take care* of me.”

“Oh darling.” Her mother’s gaze was vaguely pitying. “We’re women. Of course we need someone to take care of us. What would you have done all of these years if not for your husband? Rodger may

not have been perfect – men never are – but he treated you fairly. You never lacked for new dresses, did you? Or jewels or furs or hats. And that *splendid* Kashmir shawl. Really, the man had impeccable taste.”

Was that what her mother thought made a good husband? How many things he purchased for his wife? Rodger hadn’t bought all of those dresses and jewels and furs and hats and that *splendid* Kashmir shawl – which had really been quite hideous – for *her*. He’d bought them so that when she walked beside him *he* looked good. She’d been an accessory; no different than a pair of leather gloves or a beaded reticule.

“Mother, are you happy?” she asked.

“Am I *happy*?” Lady Edgecombe replied, her nose wrinkling ever-so-slightly as if she found the question distasteful. “What a thing to say. You know, I did not want to bring this up my dear, but you have been acting very strangely since your husband passed. Lady Greenwald–”

“Lady Greenwald can eat a sock,” Scarlett interrupted. “You know she and her daughter Eleanor have never liked me.”

“They’re *jealous* of you,” Lady Edgecombe corrected. “There is a difference.”

Pushing aside her plate of untouched food, Scarlett stood up. Bright sunlight washed in through the line of windows that wrapped around the front of the breakfast room, causing her to squint as she walked over to the sideboard to pour herself a second cup of coffee. It looked to be a beautiful spring day outside, albeit a tad windy. Her hand – the bandage hidden beneath a linen glove so as to avoid any unwanted questions – was still a bit too sore to go riding, but a

leisurely walk around the pond and through the woods would hopefully help clear her mind.

She'd barely been able to sleep last night. No matter which way she turned Owen's spiteful words kept running through her mind on an endless loop. She doubted she would ever be able to forget the blazing hate in his eyes... or the miserable heartache in his voice when he'd apologized.

Lettie. Lettie, I'm sorry. You know I would never hurt you. Please...

Clenching her teeth, she steeled herself against the part of her that wanted to forgive him. He had already made a fool of her once. Was she really going to allow him to do it again? Contrary to what she'd believed after their kiss under the tree, Owen did not have any lingering feelings for her.

He did not have any feelings at all.

The sweet boy she'd fallen in love with was gone. The sooner she accepted that the better.

"I am going for a walk," she announced, setting her cup of coffee aside after a hasty sip that burned the tip of her tongue. "Please do your best not to antagonize Felicity in my absence."

"But the morning sun--"

"I will wear a large hat."

"See that you do," Lady Edgecombe sniffed. "It is a well-known fact that the Duke of Tinsley cannot abide freckles."

Were they back to this again?

"Mother, I am *not* going to marry the Duke of Tinsley."

Lady Edgecombe's brow furrowed. "Why ever not?"

“Oh, I do not know... maybe because I have never met him?”
Scarlett’s thinly veiled sarcasm was not lost on her mother, nor was it very appreciated.

“Does this have anything to do with that man?”

She stiffened. “What man?”

“The one you went to meet yesterday. Your ‘old friend’. Please, darling,” she tittered when Scarlett looked at her with surprise. “Did you really think I didn’t know about him? Mr. Owen Steel, Captain of the Bow Street Runners. A rather remarkable advancement given where he started.” Her smile thinned. “Then he always did set his sights rather high, didn’t he?”

So great was Scarlett’s shock that had a feather chosen that precise moment to blow into the room it surely would have knocked her over. “You – you knew about Owen?”

“Know about him?” Lady Edgecombe lifted a brow. “I kept you from marrying him.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“YOU DID *what?*” Scarlett’s shout was so loud it echoed throughout the entire downstairs. Ruth, her arms filled with clean linens, came rushing in. One glance between Scarlett and her mother and she just as quickly turned on her heel and hurried out.

“Well there is no need to be so dramatic,” Lady Edgecombe frowned. “A simple ‘thank you’ would suffice.”

Scarlett stared incredulously at her mother. Thank you? It would be a miracle if she didn’t leap across the table and strangle her! All of this time her mother had known about Owen... and she’d never spoken a word.

“What do you mean you kept me from marrying him? *What did you do?*”

“You needn’t look at me like that. I did you a favor, darling.”

“Mother...”

Lady Edgecombe toyed with the end of her veil. “Oh, very well, although I don’t know why you are making such a fuss. All I did was point Lord Sherwood in your direction. He did the rest. Really, darling. This is old news.”

It certainly explained why Rodger had taken such a sudden and swift interest in her right before the beginning of the Season. If he'd waited a few days, a week at the most, he could have had his choice of debutantes, but instead he'd focused entirely on her. Scarlett had not given it much thought at the time, but now she realized the timing was too perfect to have been a coincidence.

"You knew Owen and I were planning on running away together at the end of the summer to get married, didn't you?"

"But of course I did." Lady Edgecombe rolled her eyes. "Just as I knew that if I forbade it you would have run away with that boy just to spite me. You always were a stubborn child. So instead I found you a man who was suitable and your father offered to double your dowry if Lord Sherwood made certain you were engaged before we left for London." She paused. "My only regret is that I couldn't find someone of a higher rank, but then I was pressed for time."

All of the poems Rodger had recited to her. All of the flowers and the pretty trinkets and the compliments designed to turn her head. They'd all been a lie. Every last one of them.

She knew there had been no love lost between her and Rodger in the end, but she'd at least thought they loved each other in the beginning.

How stupid she'd been.

Closing her eyes, Scarlett remembered the very first time she'd met Rodger. It had been the day after she had dinner with Owen's parents. When her young, naïve heart had been at its most vulnerable and she'd been ripe for the picking. Her own parents had unexpectedly

returned from London three days early. Even more unexpectedly they had announced they were throwing an impromptu ball. ‘A *belated birthday celebration for your dear father*’ her mother had told her as she dashed about the house ordering servants this way and that. ‘*Only forty or fifty of our closest friends. Think of it as practice, darling, for your Season debut*’.

Scarlett should have known something was amiss when her mother asked her to wear the gown she’d been saving for her *actual* Season debut. A beautiful, floaty confection of white muslin with a thin overlay of pink taffeta, it had highlighted her ivory complexion and shimmering blonde hair to perfection. Her only accessories had been a pair of pearl earrings and a matching choker that Ms. Atwood had tied at the nape of her neck with a pretty velvet ribbon.

For the first half of the ball she was uncharacteristically quiet, acting more like a shy wallflower than a spoiled debutante with the world at her fingertips. Try as she might she could not stop thinking about Owen. More than anything she wished she could have sent him an invitation. How she would have loved to be swept across the floor in his strong arms for everyone to see! But as she looked around the crowded ballroom, she knew he would never fit in here. Amidst the men in their fancy tailcoats and the women in their beautiful gowns he would stick out like a sore thumb.

Scarlett bit her bottom lip. If she married Owen, she would never be able to attend another ball. If she married him, she would never get to make her debut. If she married him, she would never again be accepted by polite society.

When he'd asked for her to elope those things had seemed so inconsequential. Why, she'd hardly given them a passing thought. But now, surrounded by her peers, they seemed to be *all* she could think about.

On a heavy sigh she stood up from the chair she'd been occupying for the better part of an hour and started towards the refreshment table, intent on sneaking a glass of champagne while Ms. Atwood's back was turned. Halfway there she suddenly stopped, the hairs on the back of her neck prickling.

Glancing back over her shoulder she found herself arrested by the greenest pair of eyes she had ever seen. The belonged to a young man who looked vaguely familiar, although if they had ever met she could not recall. He was dancing with a pretty brunette in a pale blue dress, but he was staring at Scarlett so intently she could not help but blush.

When the waltz ended he joined her by the refreshment table. Picking up a handful of purple grapes he offered her one, but she declined with a demure shake of her head.

"Suit yourself," he said before he pulled a grape off and popped it into his mouth. Immediately he grimaced and shook his head, lips pursing. "Did you know these were so sour?"

"Yes," Scarlett admitted, biting back a laugh at his expression.

"And you didn't warn me?" His tone was stern but the grin lurking in the corners of his mouth revealed he wasn't as serious as he was pretending to be. "That's rather wicked of you. Lord Sherwood, my lady. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Absently picking up a glass of champagne from the half dozen

sitting on a silver tray, she twirled the delicate stem between her fingers. “Lady Scarlett,” she said with a coquettish tilt of her head. She had not come to the ball with the intention of flirting, but Lord Sherwood was so handsome with his flashing green eyes and wavy blond hair and charming grin that she couldn’t seem to help herself. He looked older by at least ten years, but instead of being a deterrent his age made him seem wise and worldly.

“Have we met before?” he asked, rubbing his chin. “You look very familiar.”

“I thought the same thing when I first saw you staring at me.” Tilting her flute of champagne back, she took a tiny sip. “But I do not believe so.”

His grin widened. “Was I staring?”

“Quite blatantly.” She waited for him to compare her hair to a yellow tulip, but instead he merely held out his arm.

“Then I must have had a good reason. Will you dance with me, Lady Scarlett?”

“I... Yes,” she said, surprising herself. “Yes, I will.”

Ignoring the uncomfortable tingling of guilt she felt as she lightly rested her hand on his forearm – after all, what was the harm in one little waltz? – she allowed him to lead her out into the middle of the ballroom floor...

WHEN SCARLETT FINALLY OPENED HER EYES, she saw everything with a renewed clarity, including her mother.

“I am going for a walk,” she said quietly. “When I return, I should

like for you not to be here.”

“That’s perfectly fine.” Lady Edgecombe gave an airy shrug. “I was planning on going into the village anyways. I need a new hat.”

“You misunderstand. I do not want you to leave for a little while, I want you to leave completely. Go back to London, Mother.”

“Go back – go back to London?” she sputtered. “But I have only just arrived!”

“And now it is time for you to go home.” Scarlett was surprised by how calm she was, especially given everything she had just learned. Surely she should have been throwing something or screaming at someone. Instead she felt more tranquil than she had in days. Perhaps even weeks.

Her mother may have had a hand in her past, but she refused to let her interfere with her future. What was done was done. She had made her choices, and she had lived with the consequences for long enough. Rodger was gone. He could not hurt her anymore. It was time to forgive him, to forgive her parents, and – most importantly – to forgive herself.

From this moment forward Scarlett was determined to do what she should have done when she was a young girl of sixteen: follow her heart, no matter where it led her. In order to do that she needed to let go of the things – and the people – who were holding her back.

“I know you only want what is best for me. You always have. But marrying someone because of their title or how many estates they own is not what is best. It never was. I wish I had known that before I married Rodger. But perhaps... perhaps I *needed* to marry him if only

to realize what was truly important,” she said thoughtfully.

Lady Edgecombe looked at her daughter as though she’d just told her the sky was green. “Do not be ridiculous. Why else would you marry someone if not for their title?”

“For love,” Scarlett said simply. “For nothing less than outrageous, inconvenient, ridiculous love.”

“Love,” her mother said with an uncharacteristic snort. “Love does not buy you jewelry. Love does not keep you clothed in expensive gowns. *Love* is nothing more than a fairytale the poor spin to make themselves feel better about their lives. You have been given another chance, Scarlett! Do not squander it.”

“I don’t intend to.” Walking around the end of the table, she leaned down and pressed a warm kiss to her mother’s brow. “I will come visit you once you’re settled in Southampton.”

Staring straight ahead Lady Edgecombe did not reply and with a small sigh Scarlett left the breakfast room.

Wind teased her hair as she wandered down to the pond. Slanting a hand across her brow to block the bright gleam of the sun, she fished a handful of breadcrumbs left over from last evening’s dinner out of her pocket and tossed them into the water. With an excited quack and a flap of their wings the ducks came swimming over, their heads bobbing as they dove after the stale crumbs.

“Hungry little buggers, aren’t you?” she said with a laugh. Distracted by the ducks she didn’t notice the person coming up behind her until it was too late. With a hard shove to the small of her back they sent her into the pond.

She hit the surface with a loud *splash*. The sheer coldness of it sucked the air from her lungs, the lack of oxygen disorienting her as she struggled to keep her head above the murky water. But the pond was deep and her clothes were heavy and she quickly found herself sinking.

The ducks scattered in alarm as she coughed and kicked and clawed. She tried to cry out for help but when she opened her mouth foul-tasting water rushed in, making her gag and choke as she slipped back beneath the surface.

Down, down, down she sank, helpless against the dragging weight of her skirts.

As she was pulled into the dark depths of oblivion Scarlett did not think about all of the ballrooms she had danced across. She did not think about the beautiful gowns she had worn. She did not think about all of the plays she had seen or the dinner parties she had attended.

Instead, as inky blackness descended upon her, she thought only of Owen.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“SCARLETT, CAN YOU HEAR ME? SCARLETT? SCARLETT!”

“Stop... shouting... in... my... ear,” Scarlett croaked as she opened her eyes. With a gasp and a groan she promptly turned her head to the side and spit up an entire lungful of water. Sputtering, she rolled back and found herself staring up into a pair of aching familiar blue eyes.

Wolf eyes, she thought dazedly as her head spun. “What – what happened?”

“You tell me.” Owen was crouched over her, his face as white as the clouds that were rolling lazily by overhead. Like Scarlett, he was soaked through to the skin. “I heard you shout and by the time I got down to the pond you were... you were gone. You were gone,” he repeated as his fingers dug furrows into the soft green grass. Water collected on his dark lashes and spilled down his cheeks as he gazed down at her. “I thought you had drowned.”

Scarlett had thought she’d drowned as well. “You – you saved me.”

“Of course I bloody well saved you.” His gaze was fierce as he stared down at her. “I will *always* save you. Now what the devil were you doing? Going for a morning swim?”

She may have been too weak to lift herself up, but she wasn’t too

weak to scowl at him. “Yes, that is precisely what I was doing. Going for a swim with all of my clothes on!” For a dashing hero Owen was remarkably dense. “Someone pushed me in, you idiot.”

He scowled right back. “Only you would be ungrateful enough to call the person who rescued you an idiot.”

“Kiss me,” Scarlett demanded.

“What?” he said, clearly taken aback. “Why?”

“Because I want to make certain I haven’t died and am dreaming all of this.”

His blue eyes narrowed. “I can assure you that you’re not dreaming.”

“Kiss me anyway.” Reaching up, she curled her arm around his neck and yanked his mouth down to hers. After a moment’s hesitation he kissed her, gently at first and then with more and more passion until she was forced to flatten a hand against his chest. Under normal circumstances she would have enjoyed such an arduous advance, but having just narrowly escaped drowning she found her body wasn’t quite up to the challenge.

“I – can’t – breathe,” she gasped.

“You’re a vexing woman,” Owen growled as he lifted his head. “I hope you know that.”

“So I have been told.”

“You need to get into some dry clothes before you catch a chill.” Lifting her effortlessly off the ground, he held her cradled against his chest as he carried her back up the hill to the house. When they reached the front door Felicity was there to greet them, having

watched their approach from the front window in the parlor.

“What happened?” she gasped as her gaze flitted from Owen to Scarlett. “You – you are soaking wet!”

“Isn’t it o-obvious?” Despite the warm air Scarlett’s teeth began to chatter. “I f-fell in the p-p-pond.”

“Someone tried to kill her,” Owen said flatly. Tightening his grip around her shivering body, he stepped past Felicity and headed straight up the stairs.

“Her bedchamber is the last door on the right,” Felicity directed as she hurried after them. “I will have the maids start readying a hot bath. Is there anything else I can do? Should I call for a doctor?”

“I’ll take care of her,” Owen snapped.

“But–”

“It is all right, Felicity.” Looking up, Scarlett felt a slow warmth begin to spread through her limbs as she saw the unspoken concern in Owen’s clenched jaw and the fear that was still radiating from his hard gaze. Despite everything that had happened between them – her betrayal, his accusation, the hateful things they’d *both* said to one another – there was a part of him that still loved her. There had to be.

Of course I saved you. I will always save you.

“Owen will take care of me.”

“Very well.” There were a plethora of questions in Felicity’s soft violet gaze, but she kept them contained. “I will be in the library with Darcy and the children if you–”

With a kick of his heel Owen closed the door in Felicity’s face.

“That was rude,” Scarlett chided.

“You need to rest.” Walking through the dressing room and into her bedchamber he closed that door as well, effectively sealing them off from the rest of the household. “Can you stand?” When she nodded he set her carefully down on her feet but remained behind her with his arms spread, ready to catch her at a moment’s notice. Tucking a wet tendril of hair behind her ear, Scarlett turned to face him.

“You saved my life.” She lifted her hand to his chest and felt his heartbeat. It was slow and steady, but when she flattened her palm against his cold skin it gave a sudden jump. “Thank you.”

Owen’s scowl returned. “What was I supposed to do? Leave you to drown?”

“You could have.” Through the damp fabric of his shirt she could see his dusky nipples, their points hard and erect. Her own breasts tingled in response as lust unfurled inside of her belly, filling her with a fiery heat. Her hand crept upwards, fingers sliding up the taut line of his throat to where his pulse throbbed. “I do not think anyone would have blamed you.”

“As a Runner I am honor bound to save those in distress.” He inhaled sharply when she leaned up on her toes and pressed her lips to the side of his neck. “What are you doing, Scarlett?”

The pond may have washed away his scent, but he still tasted like her Owen.

“Warming myself up,” she murmured in a throaty purr. “Don’t you want to get warm with me?”

He captured her slender wrist in his hand, gently pulling her hand away even as naked desire darkened his gaze. “We shouldn’t.”

She tilted her head back. “Since when has that ever stopped us before?”

“You nearly drowned. You’re not thinking clearly.”

“My mind has never been clearer. I want you, Owen. In my bed,” she whispered silkily, her mouth brushing against his ear as she rubbed herself shamelessly against him. “And in my body.”

“Lettie...” His expression tortured, he released her wrist but kept his arms at his sides.

“Don’t think.” She began to undo his wet shirt. For every button that her nimble fingers slid free she kissed his bare chest, slowly working her way down towards his navel. “Just feel.”

Owen’s held breath exploded in a long, loud hiss when her tongue flicked beneath the waistband of his trousers. He pulled her roughly to her feet. For a moment she feared he was going to push her away, but with a groan of surrender he fisted his hands in her hair and yanked her against him, devouring her mouth in one fell swoop.

Their tongues met, heat sliding into heat. Scarlett heard the unmistakable sound of tearing fabric. Dimly she registered it was her own dress being ripped from her body, but she didn’t care. Anything to get closer to Owen. To feel his skin against her skin. To feel his heart pounding against her heart. To feel the shudder rack through his body when she slid her hand inside of his trousers and wrapped her hand around the hardest, hottest part of him.

He brought his hands beneath her thighs and scooped her up. She locked her long legs around his waist as he carried her across the room and dropped her onto the mattress. Leaning up on her elbow she

watched him as he undressed, marveling at the hard lines and ridges of his body.

There were scars on his skin that she'd never seen before, evidence left behind from the war he'd fought and the life he'd lived. Scarlett's breath caught when she saw a long, jagged scar that ran the length of his ribcage. The pain he must have felt... was it any wonder the man he'd become was harder than the boy she'd known? While she'd been off flitting from ballroom to ballroom he had been fighting on some distant battlefield, shedding blood for a king and a country that had never given a damn about him.

"From a bayonet," he said gruffly, following her gaze down.

"Does it still hurt?" she whispered as she reached out and traced the puckered flesh.

"No."

Running her fingertip along his hipbone and down across his sleek flank, she beckoned him onto the bed. "Then come here."

Owen needed no other invitation. He lowered himself onto the mattress with a panther's grace, muscles coiling and bunching as he held his body poised over hers. Filtered sunlight caught in his hair, turning the tousled strands from dark mahogany to burnished amber. Capturing her lips in another drugging kiss that left her head spinning, he bit her plump bottom lip before following the curve of her collarbone with his tongue.

When she felt his mouth at her breast she gasped and arched her spine, head falling back amidst the pillows as he licked one nipple, then the other. While Rodger had always thoughtlessly hurried in his

eagerness to find his own pleasure, Owen lingered, treating Scarlett's body as if it were a canvas and he a painter with all the time in the world.

He brought color to her body with broad strokes and light, teasing nibbles. Soon she was writhing beneath him, her breath coming in short little pants, her eyes glazed with lust and desire. When he dipped a broad finger into the honeyed depths of her womanhood her hips shot off the mattress.

"Do you like that?" His husky laugh brushed against her navel as his head descended between her silken thighs.

"Yes," she moaned when she felt his tongue part her blonde curls.
"Oh yes."

Owen toyed with her for what felt like hours. He brought her to the brink again and again, but always pulling her back at the last possible second. Only when she felt half mad with passion did he lift himself above her and slowly, so slowly she nearly screamed, slide his pulsing length inside of her in one smooth, easy thrust until he was sheathed to the hilt.

Her nails dug furrows in his back as he withdrew and then plunged forward again. Sweat glazed both of their bodies as they moved in tandem with one another, straining towards the same blissful peak of oblivion.

Scarlett reached it first. With Owen's name on her lips she tumbled over the edge, her entire body convulsing in one long wave of pleasure. Throwing his head back he followed her with a deafening roar that echoed through the bedchamber.

When it was finished – when both of them were too sated and too weak to even lift their heads – they laid together side by side with their limbs entwined and their hearts beating to the same steady rhythm.

This, Scarlett thought as she languidly drifted in that warm, cozy space between sleep and awake, *this is what true happiness feels like.*

CHAPTER TWENTY

“WE SHOULDN’T HAVE—”

“If you say we shouldn’t have done that,” Scarlett murmured sleepily, “I am going to pick up a pillow and bludgeon you over the head with it.”

Swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, Owen sat up. Twisting, he looked back at her over his shoulder and lifted one wry brow. “Something tells me you’re not in any condition to lift a single finger, let alone a pillow.”

Grinning, Scarlett stretched like a cat, sending the white sheet she’d thrown haphazardly over herself slithering down to the floor. When Owen’s eyes heated her grin widened and she reached across the mattress to playfully pinch the top of his left buttock. “Keep looking at me like that and I will somehow summon the strength. Although I do not think I shall waste it on throwing pillows.” Her eyebrows wiggled suggestively and with a half groan/half laugh Owen stood up.

Leaning back on her elbows Scarlett watched him unabashedly as he collected his clothes. His dark hair was delightfully disheveled. His eyes still a bit glazed. And was that a bite mark on his shoulder? She bit her lip. Why yes, yes she believed it was.

Another long, languid stretch and she joined him in sorting out their attire.

“Everything is still damp.” Pulling her chemise out from beneath a chair she gave the wrinkled undergarment a little shake, then wrinkled her nose. “And it smells like the pond. I’ll have fresh clothes brought for you after we clean ourselves up.”

Owen stilled. “I am not wearing anything that belonged to your husband.”

“Nor would I ever ask you too.” Taking note of the sudden tension in his expression, Scarlett sighed. She had known their passionate tryst wouldn’t miraculously fix everything, but she’d hoped their unspoken truce might have lasted for a *little* bit longer. Yanking the rumpled coverlet off the end of the bed, she walked across the room and handed it to Owen. “We are going to talk,” she said when he looked down at the coverlet in confusion, “but I will not be able to concentrate if you are naked.”

He wrapped the coverlet around his waist and she did the same with a sheet. Tugging it up until it covered her breasts, she perched on the edge of the mattress and hugged her legs against her chest. Owen remained standing. They stared at one another for a long moment, and when they finally spoke they did so at the same time.

“I want to apologize for the way—”

“I need to tell you how sorry I am—”

The corners of Scarlett’s lips twitched. “Should we both acknowledge that we have treated one another poorly and move on from there?”

“No.”

“Owen, I do not want to fight. Can we please just—”

“No,” he repeated, cutting her off. “We cannot move on until I have said what I came here to say. Or did you think it was merely a coincidence that I happened to be at the pond?”

“Come to think of it, why *were* you there? Not that I can find any fault in your timing. Unless you were the one who pushed me in.” She grinned, having spoken in jest, but by the way Owen’s jaw hardened it appeared he did not seem to find her very amusing.

“You must know I would never harm you, Scarlett.”

She arched a brow. “Oh really? I cannot imagine any greater harm than having one’s neck stretched. I’ve never seen a hanging, but I have heard stories. It sounds *very* harmful.”

“What the devil are you talking about?” he scowled. “No one is going to hang you.”

“And what do you think happens when a woman is found guilty of murdering her husband? The Magistrate gives her a tap on the wrist and tells her not to do it again?” she said incredulously. The sheet slid down when she threw her hands out wide, exposing the creamy tops of her breasts. It was to Owen’s credit that he glanced down only once. “You have to know I did not kill Rodger.”

“I know.”

“Because if you insist on pursuing you’re ridiculous... what did you say?”

“I said I know. That you did not kill Lord Sherwood,” he elaborated when Scarlett looked at him blankly. “That is what I came to tell you.

And to apologize for the way I acted at the inn.”

“I... I do not know what to say.”

Now it was Owen’s lips that twitched. “I think I like you like this, scantily dressed and speechless. You should try it more often.”

“You really do not think I killed Rodger?” she whispered.

“I know you did not,” he said confidence.

“*Then why did you ever accuse me to begin with?*” She punctuated her shriek by picking up a pillow and throwing it with all of her might at his head.

Owen ducked.

The pillow went sailing past him and hit the wall in an explosion of goose feathers.

“Let me explain–” he began, holding up his hand, but Scarlett was having none of it.

“Do you know what people would have said if they’d had even an *inkling* that I might have murdered my husband?” she demanded furiously. “I would have been ruined! I never would have been able to show my face in polite society again!”

Owen’s eyes turned cold. “And we couldn’t have that, could we? Rest assured you can continue playing the poor, grieving widow while I look for Lord Sherwood’s killer. *Polite society* need never be the wiser. In fact, with all of the sympathy you’ll be receiving I imagine you will not be wanting for offers of marriage. Should I call you ‘Your Grace’ now or wait until after the wedding?”

“Owen.” Scarlett took a deep breath. She had been meeting his anger with more anger of her own, but the hurt she saw in his eyes...

it cut her down to the bone. He still had so much pain inside of him. Like a wolf with its paw caught in a trap he was lashing out at anyone who came too close, and she'd come the closest of all. But she of all people knew what it was like to ache so much inside that it made you bitter and angry, which was why she was *not* going to let her temper get the better of her. Instead of yelling at the wolf, she was going to remain calm. She was going to finally say what was in her heart. And she was going to get that damn paw out of the trap once and for all.

"What?" Owen snapped, shifting restlessly from side to side.

Sliding down off the mattress, Scarlett held her sheet up with one hand and tucked a thick curl behind her ear with the other. "Do you know what I was thinking about when I was in the pond? When I thought – no, when I *knew* – I was going to drown?"

His mouth twisted into a sneer. "All of the dinner parties you were going to miss?"

"No," she said simply. "I was thinking about you. The same way I have thought about you every day since I made the largest mistake of my—"

"There is no need to revisit the past," he interrupted. "We were both there. We know what happened."

"But don't you see? There is *every* need." She padded across her bedroom, toes sinking silently into the wool carpet. "You can cut a weed down again and again, but if you do not pull out the root it will keep coming back. Our root started growing seven years ago, Owen. It is finally time we pulled it out. Please," she said imploringly. "Just listen to me."

“Lettie—”

“*Please.*”

His expression softened. “I never could deny you anything, could I? Not when you looked at me with those gray eyes as big as the sky.”

“No.” Her lips brushed across his cheek. “You never could.”

Slowly, brick by brick, the wall Owen had built around his heart began to crumble. Scarlett felt it shudder when he put his arms around her. And she watched it finally fall when he said in a voice hoarse with emotion, “How could you do it? How could you choose him over me? I loved you, Lettie. I bloody well loved you more than anything.”

“I know you did.” She tilted her head back. When she saw his eyes were as damp as her own she raised her thumb and caught a single tear before it had the chance to roll down his cheek. “I loved you as well. But I was a naïve, selfish girl and I did a naïve, selfish thing. I chose Rodger because he was safe, and because he was what I thought I wanted. I chose him because I was afraid of losing everything that I believed was important but in the end it cost me the most important thing of all. You. And for that I am so sorry, Owen.” Her voice broke. “I am so t-terribly sorry.”

When she began to cry in earnest his grip tightened. “You never lost me, Lettie. I never forgot about you. I never stopped thinking about you. You were with me on the battlefields of France. You were with me when I returned home. You were with me when I stood over the graves of my parents. You have been there, Lettie, every single day, for seven long years.”

Had he ripped Scarlett's heart out of her chest he could not have destroyed her more completely.

"I wanted to hate you," Owen continued. "God knows I did a bloody good job of pretending that I did. But no matter how hard I tried, I never could. Not really. Deep down I knew you did not have anything to do with Rodger's death. It was a convenient way to be close to you. To see your beautiful face. To hear your laugh. To see your smile." His brow furrowed. "Not that there has been very much to smile about. The way I treated you—"

"Was no less than I deserved for what I did." She would not let him punish himself on her behalf. In their own way, they had each suffered enough pain and regret to last a hundred lifetimes. Now that they'd come face to face with their past it was time, at long last, to look to the future. "I love you, Owen. I always have and I always will."

He crooked a finger under her chin and tilted it up. "I love you Lettie."

Her eyes closed. To hear those words again...

They were worth more to her than any jewel or any title ever could be.

"What should we do now?" She looked up at him beneath a thick sweep of pale golden lashes. "I know you will have to return to London soon but I should remain here, at least until Felicity has found a safe place to land for her and the children. Then I can join you."

There was a protective gleam in Owen's blue eyes as he shook his head from side to side. "No. We're leaving for London this afternoon.

Both of us.”

“Oh, but I can’t do that,” Scarlett protested. “I would be leaving Felicity in the lurch not to mention I have had all of my belongings moved here. I’ve nothing left in town, not even a single pair of shoes. At the end of the month I can begin packing and come to Bow Street once everything has been sorted.”

“Someone tried to kill you today. Once they learn they were not successful, they *will* try again.”

“You don’t know that,” she said even as a chill raced down her spine. Stepping out of his embrace she brought a finger to her mouth and bit down on her nail, worrying it back and forth between her teeth until a tiny sliver broke off. “It – it could have been an accident.”

Owen lifted a brow. “Someone *accidentally* shoved you into the pond and then left you to drown?”

“Well when you put it that way—”

“There is no other way to put it. Someone killed your husband, Lettie. Now they’ve come for you. Until I find out who they are and arrest them, I need to know you’re safe and there is no safer place than Bow Street.”

“Why do you think it’s the same person?”

“Had you drowned, it would have looked like an accident. Just like Rodger’s death was meant to. If I’d not discovered his horse’s girth had been cut I never would have suspected he’d been murdered.”

At the word *murdered* tiny goose pimples broke out all up and down Scarlett’s arms. She had been so focused on Owen that she hadn’t

really let herself think about Rodger. Now she had no choice for Owen was right: Rodger's death and the attempt on her own life were too much alike to be a coincidence.

But who the devil would want them dead? And why not just kill them when they were both together? Unless that was never their plan...

"My earring," she said suddenly.

"Yes," Owen said, watching her closely. "What about it?"

"I don't know why we did not see it before. Well, why *you* didn't see it before. You are, after all, a Runner. Granted, you have been a little bit distracted, but I think as a Captain the expectations should be higher than if--"

"What are you trying to say?"

"I've been set up! Don't you see? Someone must have planted my earring on Rodger's body on purpose. How else would it have gotten there? It is the only thing that makes sense. The *real* killer wanted to make you think I was there when Rodger was killed. But I wasn't," she said quickly, less Owen suddenly changed his mind about her innocence. "They never wanted to kill me. They wanted--"

"--for you to be charged with Rodger's murder," Owen finished darkly, "and let the law take care of the rest."

"Precisely. Even if I'd been found not guilty, I would have been completely ruined and no one, least of all you, would have *ever* suspected who the real murderer was." Scarlett went absolutely still as a bleak, horrible realization dawned. "But I know," she whispered. "I know who they are."

“Who?” Owen demanded. “Lettie, who is it?”

“Someone close enough to know that I had those earrings made specifically for my wedding. Someone who wanted to use you to hurt me. Someone who has an excellent reason to make both Rodger and I suffer. Felicity.” She raised her tear-filled gaze to Owen’s. “It was Felicity.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“ABSOLUTELY NOT,” OWEN SAID FLATLY.

“Owen, I love you. I want to be with you. If this is the one thing standing in our way, then isn’t it better we get it over with sooner rather than later? You know this is a good plan.” Scarlett blinked up at him, her gray eyes as soft and as wide as he’d ever seen them. “Please.”

His jaw clenched. “That isn’t going to work this time.”

“Oh, *fine*.” She crossed her arms. “But I am doing it anyways.”

“Not without my help, you’re not.”

“Which is why you are going to help me.”

Owen snorted. “The hell I am.”

“You are being unreasonable.”

“And you’re being bloody crazy if you think I am going to let you risk your life. Now pack your things. We’re leaving for Bow Street this afternoon.” Less than a day had passed since he’d pulled Scarlett out of the pond, but after everything they’d learned – about each other and the *true* culprit behind Rodger’s murder – it felt like an entire year had gone by.

Unwilling to let Scarlett out of his sight, even for a minute, Owen

had spent the night with her (although neither one of them had gotten much sleep) and woken the next morning to discover she'd come up with an elaborate – not to mention completely ridiculous – plan to get Felicity to confess.

Owen was still furious with himself for not realizing Felicity was the one behind everything. As soon as Scarlett had told him what Rodger had done to her all those years ago it made perfect sense. He even felt bad for her, and had she stopped at killing Rodger he might have turned a blind eye to her crimes. But she'd crossed a line when she had made an attempt on Scarlett's life and now he had no choice but to arrest her. Which he would have done first thing this morning if Scarlett hadn't stopped him.

"Felicity is my oldest friend." Walking across the library Scarlett gazed out the window at the rolling fields behind the manor. "If is she behind all of this, I do not want to convict her on a hunch or speculation. I need irrefutable proof."

How was it, Owen wondered silently, that a man could love a woman to distraction and still want to shake her?

"It won't matter what you need if you're dead. No. It is too dangerous."

"Who are *you* to say what is too dangerous?" Whirling around, she pinned him with a glare. "You were going to toss me in Newgate!"

"Which I may still do," he growled, "if you don't get your arse upstairs and start packing!"

"Oh! You are *impossible*. I do not even know why I bother."

Owen crossed the room. Reaching out, he wrapped an arm around

her waist and yanked her back against his chest. "Because you love me," he whispered huskily in her ear.

"Something which I am beginning to seriously rethink."

"Are you?" His eyes taking on a roguish glint, he lifted her hair and trailed his mouth down the sensitive curve of her neck.

"Stop trying to distract me," she warned even as she tilted her head to the side so he could nibble his way down her shoulder.

"Is that what I'm doing?" He sank his teeth into her ivory skin, nipping just hard enough to elicit a soft gasp before he soothed the bite with a kiss. But when he grasped the edge of her bodice and gave it a tug, she stepped neatly out of his embrace and looked up at him with a frown.

"Yes. That is precisely what you are trying to do. Owen, this is important to me. I have already made so many mistakes. I do not know if I could live with myself if I made another one."

"I *know* I could not live with myself if I allowed something to happen to you." The idea of losing her after having just gotten her back... His entire body tensed at the thought. He would not risk her safety. Not for anything or anyone. But he also knew that short of carrying her over his shoulder she wasn't leaving until she was convinced of Felicity's guilt. "Let's compromise."

"Compromise?" Scarlett repeated, looking at him as if he'd just suggested they sprout wings and fly up on top of the roof.

"Yes." *Compromise.*" He tucked a loose curl behind her ear. "Something we are both going to have to learn how to do if we're to have any semblance of peace."

"I rather like it when we fight. Although I suppose you're right," she conceded when he lifted a brow. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well..."

"I'VE CHANGED MY MIND! I AM NOT GOING ANYWHERE WITH YOU! GO AWAY." Grabbing the heavy front door, Scarlett tried to slam it in Owen's face but his boot kept it from closing.

"No."

"Remove it this instant or I'll--"

"You'll do what?" he sneered before he easily pushed the door open and walked past her into the foyer. Ignoring Scarlett's sputters of outrage he nodded curtly at Felicity who was standing at the base of the staircase with a dumbstruck expression on her face. "You are coming with me to London and that is final. Now put on a cloak and let's go."

"You have lost your mind."

Owen's teeth flashed in a humorless smile. "You seem to be under the impression that I am asking you to accompany me. I am not asking. I am telling. You can either climb into the carriage of your own accord or be thrown into it. It makes no difference to me."

Her eyes narrowed to thin slits of furious gray. "You wouldn't dare."

"Try me," he invited in a dangerously silky voice.

Scarlett's eyes widened ever-so-slightly. Owen was very good at this. Better than she'd imagined he would be, considering all of the sweet things he'd whispered in her ear last night. As she racked her

brain for something equally horrid to say in return his gaze flicked meaningfully over her shoulder, a silent reminder that Felicity was listening to their every word, just as they'd hoped.

"I – I hate you!"

Owen frowned.

Not really, she mouthed.

"Get in the carriage," he growled.

"Captain Steel I – I think Scarlett has made herself quite clear."

Hurrying across the foyer, Felicity took Scarlett by the hand and pulled her away from the door. "She does not wish to go with you."

Owen turned his glare on Felicity. For the first time since he'd forced himself through the door his fury was not feigned. "I don't believe I asked for your opinion."

"Do not talk to her like that!" Stepping between them, Scarlett made certain she was turned away from Felicity when she wiggled her eyebrows up and down, a signal to Owen that their play was ready for its final act.

"This is not worth the trouble. I'm going to London without you and I am *not* coming back!"

"Go on then!" Scarlett shouted as he turned on his heel and stormed out of the foyer. "I never want to see you again for as long as I live!"

In the stunned silence that followed Owen's abrupt departure Scarlett turned to Felicity and shook her head. "And to think I once loved him."

"What – what *happened*?" Felicity asked incredulously.

"Oh, you know..." She waved her hand dismissively in the air. "Just

another fight. That's all we ever seem to do. It's probably better that he go without me. It never would have worked between us."

"But what about..." Felicity glanced left and right before lowering her voice to a whisper. "*Rodger's murder?*"

Scarlett shrugged. "As it turns out he was killed by his mistress. Can you believe it? Owen received a letter from Bow Street just yesterday. That is what he came to tell me. Apparently she turned herself in and confessed to everything."

"But that is wonderful news!"

"Yes, isn't it?" Scarlett studied Felicity as intently as she dared, but if her friend's enthusiasm was disingenuous she did a magnificent job at hiding it. She forced herself to smile. "You know, all of this drama has wreaked havoc on my skin. I do believe a trip to Bath is in order. In fact, I think I will leave bright and early tomorrow morning. You and the children can remain here for as long as you like, of course."

"Are – are you sure?" Felicity said uncertainly. "We would not want to impose..."

"Don't be silly. You can even move your things into my bedchamber if you would like. There is no telling how long I shall be gone. Why, I may not even come back at all!"

Felicity's brow furrowed. "Scarlett, are you feeling all right?"

Actually no, I am not. Why, do you ask? Oh, I've just found out my dearest friend in the entire world is trying to kill me!

"I've never felt better," she said airily. "In fact, I believe I will go for a ride."

"But it's nearly sundown."

“I’ll be quick. I just need to change my clothes. Be a dear and ask one of the grooms to saddle Fancy for me, won’t you?”

“Of... of course.”

Scarlett felt the weight of Felicity’s frown on her back as she turned and walked away, but she did not look behind her. Instead she kept her gaze straight ahead, forcing herself to take small, measured steps as she went up the stairs. As soon as she knew she was out of sight, however, she broke into a run and dashed down the hallway as fast as her legs would carry her.

The trick to the plan was timing. If Felicity had believed their little farce in the foyer, then she thought Owen was gone and Scarlett was leaving for Bath in the morning. Which left her with no choice but to make another attempt on Scarlett’s life tonight. Given the way she had killed Rodger, they were betting she would try the same method again, albeit with Scarlett’s saddle this time.

The sun was just beginning to set when Scarlett burst out of the servant’s door and snuck across the lawn, staying to the shadows as she made her way down to the stables. She’d promised Owen that she would stay in the house – that was the compromise he’d demanded – but how could she? If Felicity was caught red-handed then Scarlett wanted to be there. She *needed* to be there. If only to see the betrayal with her own eyes for she feared that was the only way she would be able to believe it.

Except when she tip-toed into the stables no one was there. Not Felicity. Not Owen. Not even a single groom or footman. Aside from the horses quietly munching away at their dinner, the entire barn was

eerily vacant.

Tiny hairs rose on the back of Scarlett's neck as she slowly walked down the freshly raked aisle, pausing at every stall to peer inside. The familiar scent of horse and hay assailed her nostrils. Usually the smell was a comfort, but not tonight. Not when the air was filled with an uneasy tension and the barn was growing darker by the second.

Scarlett had nearly reached the last stall when she heard them. The soft scuffle of footsteps. *Finally*. She still did not know where Owen was hiding, but she didn't doubt he was somewhere near. Taking a deep breath she slowly turned, ready to confront Felicity... and nearly stumbled over a bag of feed when she saw Ruth standing in the middle of the aisle holding a long, jagged knife pointed straight at Scarlett's heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND.” As surprise gave way to shock and shock to fear – where the *devil* was Owen?! – Scarlett gaped at her maid in disbelief. “All this time... it was *you*? *You* were the one who killed Rodger?”

“Finally some recognition.” An unnaturally wide smile stretched Ruth’s mouth as she sauntered towards Scarlett, tossing her knife from one hand to the other. “I have been waiting so long for you to figure it out. After I almost drowned you in the pond I thought for *certain* you would know it was me, but instead you blamed Felicity!” Her childish giggle sent a chill racing down Scarlett’s spine. “I really could not have asked for a more perfect ending.”

“But... why?” Light from an oil lamp left in front of one of the stalls reflected off the edge of the knife as it flew through the air, causing Scarlett’s breath to catch in her throat when she saw how sharp it was. “What did Rodger ever do to you? What did *I* ever do? I thought we were friends!”

“Friends.” Ruth stopped short. “I wasn’t your friend, I was your servant. And you never let me forget it, did you?”

“I—”

“*Brush my hair, Ruth,*” she mocked in a high-pitched voice. “*Button*

my dress, Ruth. Fetch my tea, Ruth."

"If you thought I mistreated you I'm sorry." Scarlett's gaze darted left and right as she searched in vain for a weapon. "But that is no reason to kill me!"

"You're right," Ruth said agreeably. "It's not."

"Then why—"

"BECAUSE YOU STOLE RODGER AWAY FROM ME!" Ruth's shriek bounced off the rafters and spooked the horses. They whinnied and pawed, the whites of their eyes flashing as they spun in their stalls. "He loved *me*. He was going to marry *me*. And you stole him!"

She's mad, Scarlett realized as Ruth continued to giggle. *She's absolutely mad*.

"I promise you that I had no idea of your feelings." Speaking in as calm and as quiet a voice as she could manage given the circumstances she held up her hands, palms facing outwards. "Why don't you put the knife down, Ruth? Put the knife down and we can figure all of this out. No one needs to get hurt."

Ruth frowned. "But I'm already hurt and Rodger's dead. Now it's your turn!"

She leaped forward with a feral scream, but Scarlett had been anticipating a sudden attack and she twisted to the side, narrowly escaping the tip of the knife as it flew past her face. Losing her balance she slammed hard against the wall and dropped to the ground in a crouch when she saw Ruth's arm slash through the air out of her peripheral vision. A half second later the knife buried itself into the wood right where Scarlett's head had been.

Scarlett did not give herself time to think. Launching her body forward, she caught Ruth around the waist and both women went flying into the dirt. The knife skittered across the aisle and slid underneath a trunk. When Ruth tried to lunge after it Scarlett grabbed her ankle and dragged her backwards.

Ruth kicked out, the heel of her boot catching Scarlett squarely in the chest. The blow sent her reeling. She fell back with a pained cry, her head striking the ground with a hard *thump* that left her dazed and her vision blurred. Dimly aware that if Ruth got ahold of the knife it would all be over, she forced herself to her feet.

Intent on reaching beneath the trunk to get her knife, Ruth did not notice Scarlett creeping up behind her until it was too late.

In a tangle of limbs and hair the two women went rolling across the aisle, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake. The horses continued to spin circles in their stalls, nostrils flared and eyes wide. A knee to her gut caused Scarlett's breath to explode in a loud *whoosh* of air. Twisting, she managed to tangle her fingers in Ruth's bun and gave it a vicious pull that flipped the maid onto her back. For an instant both women were side by side staring up at the wooden rafters, their chests rising and falling in tandem as they sucked air into their lungs.

"We – have – to – stop," Scarlett gasped. "Ruth, this is madness."

Ruth's lips peeled back in a crimson smile. "This is revenge."

She rolled on top of Scarlett and managed to get one hand around her throat. Scarlett gagged, black spots dancing across her line of vision as she struggled to breathe. Just as darkness was beginning to welcome her into its cold, lifeless embrace she used the last of her

strength and bucked her hips, breaking Ruth's grip and sending her toppling off to the side.

Scarlett started crawling for the door when she smelled it.

Smoke.

Looking back over her shoulder she gasped in horror when she saw a line of brilliant orange flames licking across the aisle. Ruth stood behind the wall of fire, still cradling the oil lamp she'd used to start it.

"Ruth, what did you do?" Scarlett cried.

"You won't get out this time. Neither of us will." Completely oblivious to the fire as it swept up the wall, Ruth's face turned dreamy. "I'll see you soon Rodger."

Fear for her own life and for the lives of the horses trapped in their stalls helped Scarlett stagger to her feet. She rushed to the first stall and threw open the door. "Go!" she screamed, waving her arms. "Get out of here!"

With a frantic whinny the horse leaped out of its stall and bolted down the aisle. Coughing, Scarlett managed to get two more horses freed before a pair of strong arms picked her up from behind. She struck out on instinct, flailing and kicking her legs.

"Lettie, it's me. It's *me*."

Owen.

A mewling cry escaped her lips as she collapsed back against his chest. Lifting her up, he ripped off his cravat and held it over her nose and mouth to shield her from the punishing wave of smoke as he ran out of the burning barn, passing grooms and footmen who were running in to save the remaining horses. Firelight reflected off the

trembling flanks of those that had already been freed and were gathered together on the side lawn. When she saw Fancy was among them Scarlett breathed an enormous sigh of relief.

Owen carried her a safe distance away before pulling his cravat away from her face. "Are you injured?" he demanded. "Is anything broken? Do you need to see a doctor?"

Scarlett's coiffure was ripped askew, one sleeve of her dress torn completely off, and blood trickled down from a cut above her right eyebrow. But she was alive.

"I – I am fine," she managed to croak.

"Good." Owen's grip tightened. "Because now I am going to have to kill you. Lettie, what were you *thinking*?" He glared down at her, his blue eyes as fierce as she'd ever seen them. "I told you to stay in the house! You could have been killed. If something had happened to you..." He turned his head to the side as his voice turned ragged. "I don't know what I would have done."

"It was Ruth." Even as she spoke the words out loud Scarlett still could not believe it. "All this time... it was Ruth."

"I know." He gathered her close. "I know."

Felicity came sprinting across the lawn, her face a mixture of trepidation and hope. When she saw Scarlett safely cradled in Owen's arms she stopped short, leaning forward to brace her hands on her knees before continuing towards them at a more dignified pace.

"I was so worried!" Taking Scarlett's hand, she gave it a hard squeeze which Scarlett did her best to return. The lingering effects of shock were keeping most of the pain at bay, but her entire body felt

numb.

“What – what happened?” she asked, looking at Felicity and then up at Owen. “Where were you?”

“I followed Felicity down to the pond.” Owen’s expression was suffused with guilt. “I was going to confront her, but when I got there we both saw the smoke rising up through the trees. Felicity ran to the house to make sure her children were safe and I went to the stables.”

“I was trying to catch fireflies for Henry and Anne,” Felicity explained at Scarlett’s questioning glance. “That’s why I went to the pond after I told one of the grooms to ready your horse. I had no idea you suspected *I* was the one behind everything!”

“I’m sorry,” Scarlett said contritely. “I should have known better.”

“No, you were doing what you thought was right. Although,” she added, arching a brow, “if in the future you ever again think I have killed someone please tell me first before you come up with some elaborate scheme to catch me. It will save us both time and worry.”

Scarlett managed a wobbly smile. “I will.” Her smile faded as she happened to glance over Owen’s shoulder at the barn. Only half of it was still standing. The rest had been consumed by flames that a brigade of servants were putting out with buckets of water. “Ruth. Did she...”

“No,” Owen said grimly. “She did not make it out.”

Tears filled Scarlett’s eyes as she laid her head back against his chest. “I never suspected anything was wrong.”

“None of us did,” Felicity said quickly. “She – she wasn’t well. That much is clear.”

To think madness could conceal itself so cleverly... Scarlett gave a small, involuntary shudder and Owen's grip tightened.

"You need to rest." Holding her in his arms, he stood up. "As soon as you feel well enough to travel we will leave for London."

"Is tonight too soon?" Scarlett tried to laugh, but it came out as more of a barking cough.

"Tomorrow afternoon at the earliest," Owen said firmly as he carried her towards the house.

She tilted her head back. "This morning you couldn't get me out of here fast enough."

"That was before you decided to go toe to toe with a madwoman armed only with your sarcastic wit."

Another barking cough rattled Scarlett's lungs. It was probably in poor taste to laugh in the face of such tragedy, but having just survived nearly being stabbed to death and burned alive, she really did not care. "Do you know this is the third time you've saved my life?"

"The third and the last, I hope."

She poked him with her elbow. "Are you saying you're done being my knight in shining armor?"

Now it was Owen's turn to laugh. "Is that how you see me? A knight in shining armor?"

"Yes." She pressed her hand over his heart. "It is how I have always seen you."

"In that case I will be there to save your life as many times as it takes." He stopped walking to gaze down at her. Stars glittered behind

him as a full moon rose high in the sky, but its glowing white light was nothing compared to the light shining in Owen's eyes. "I am never going to let you go, Lettie. Our life together begins now. Everything that happened before... it helped lead us here, but it does not define us. From this second onward I am going to be there for you every single day. I know it will not always be easy, but as long as we compromise--"

"I do not think I like that word," Scarlett interrupted.

Owen scowled. "Do you have any idea how bloody difficult you are?"

"Yes, I do. Just as I know you would not have me any other way."

"You are certainly right about that." He kissed her gently, a soft brush of his lips that left her entire body tingling from the tip of her chin to the tip of her toes. "I love you, Lettie."

Would she ever tire of hearing those words? Their road had not been an easy one. It had been filled with ruts and bumps. They had both stumbled along the way. But every mile they'd struggled through had been worth all of the pain and the heartache and the uncertainty for it had brought them here, to this moment. And there was no other place on earth she would rather be, nor any other man she would rather be with.

"I love you, Owen. I always have. No matter what comes, I promise I always will." A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Even when you make me very, very angry."

"I think that is a compromise we can both agree on."

And so they did.

EPILOGUE

Several months later

London

IT WAS NOT CONSIDERED THE WEDDING OF THE SEASON. In fact, hardly anyone knew Scarlett and Owen were engaged, let alone that they had gotten married in a small church outside of London on a rainy, nondescript autumn day.

Scarlett's walk down the aisle had not been heralded by trumpets. Rose petals had not fallen from the eaves. A long hand sewn veil trimmed with lace and pearls had not covered her face. In fact, she hadn't worn a veil at all.

Just a plain blue muslin dress to match Owen's eyes.

When the ceremony was over all of the guests gathered at Bow Street to celebrate over warm cups of tea and blueberry scones. Scarlett had made Bow Street her home while she and Owen searched for more suitable living quarters. While she wanted a townhouse near Grosvenor Square, Owen was determined to find a single home within walking distance of Bow Street.

They were both still learning how to compromise.

One thing they did not need to compromise on, however, was their

love. It poured out of them with every glance, every smile, and every wayward touch of their hands as they circled the room accepting well wishes from their closest friends and family.

From the far corner Felicity watched as Owen absently turned his head and kissed Scarlett's brow. With a wistful sigh she sipped her tea. Would another man ever look at her like Owen looked at Scarlett? She liked to think it was possible, but her future seemed much bleaker than it once had. After all, who would want a mother of two children with no dowry and a reputation destroyed by divorce?

No one.

The answer, she feared, was no one.

Of its own accord her gaze wandered to where one Mr. Felix Spencer stood talking to a well-dressed man whom she assumed to be another Runner. Try as she might, she had been unable to stop thinking about Felix – or their kiss – since he jumped out the window and disappeared seemingly into thin air. This was the first time she had seen him since that fateful day and he looked every bit as roguishly handsome as she remembered.

He was dressed formally for the occasion in a black tailcoat that was a bit tight around the shoulders, indicating he'd borrowed it from someone else. Beneath it he wore a crisp white linen shirt and tan breeches that were tucked inside black leather riding boots. His cravat, which had been neatly folded and pinned during the wedding, was now dangling down on either side of his neck, exposing a V of golden skin.

When Felicity felt a faint tingling at the nape of her neck her gaze

flew up to his face... and her cheeks bloomed with color when she realized Felix was looking straight at her. She glanced swiftly away, but it was too late. He had caught her staring and they both knew it.

There is nothing to do now, she decided reasonably, *except to fall into a deep dark hole and disappear forever.*

But of course she couldn't do that. Not with Henry and Anne depending on her. So instead of cowering – something she'd found herself doing much too often as of late – she lifted her chin, squared her shoulders, and forced herself to walk over to where Felix and his companion were standing.

"Miss Atwood." Felix's eyes danced with amusement as a knowing grin lifted one side of his mouth. "I wondered if I would see ye here. Grant, might I introduce you to Miss Felicity Atwood. A close friend of the bride, if I am not mistaken."

"A pleasure to meet you," Grant murmured politely as he bowed over Felicity's hand, his manners as flawless as Felix's were crude. "If you'll excuse me, I see someone over there I must speak with." And then, quite suddenly, Felicity and Felix were alone.

"Stop looking at me like that," she demanded, her entire face turning a deep, dull red when his amber-colored gaze slowly traveled the length of her body from the top of her bonnet to the tips of her boots.

Felix lifted one eyebrow. "Like what, love?"

"Like we are – like we are intimately acquainted," she hissed after a quick glance over her shoulder to make sure no one was within hearing distance.

A second brow rose to join the first. "Here I thought that was exactly what we were."

"We had *one* kiss" – but oh, what a kiss it had been... although she certainly wasn't going to tell *him* that! – "and nothing more."

"You know what I say, love. Quality over quantity," he drawled.

"Oh!" By sheer force of will she managed not to stomp her foot.

"Mr. Spencer *please* behave yourself."

"Now that's one thing I try to avoid at all costs." He stepped closer, crowding her back against a table filled with platters upon platters of blueberry scones. "Have ye been thinking about me, Miss Atwood?"

Every night.

"Certainly not."

"Liar," he said softly.

"Mr. Spencer–"

"I desire ye, Miss Atwood." His eyes narrowed on her face, his voice dropping to a husky purr that felt like velvet against her skin. "Do you know what I do with things I desire?"

"N-no," she managed to gasp as a spark of heat ignited between her thighs.

"I take them."

A DANGEROUS PROPOSAL

- *Bow Street Brides, Book 2* -

JILLIAN EATON

A DISGRACED LADY...

Felicity Atwood's life was a debutante's dream. She had a wealthy husband, two beautiful children, and an elegant townhouse in Grosvenor Square. Everything was perfect...until her husband publicly left her for his mistress and her dream turned into a nightmare. Now she's divorced, destitute, and bordering on desperate.

A CHARMING THIEF...

Felix Spencer has never met a piece of jewelry he couldn't steal or a pretty woman he couldn't charm...until Felicity. A cunning thief turned Bow Street Runner, he's exactly the sort of man she has been taught to avoid at all costs. But try as she might she cannot forget the kiss he stole from her...or the way she feels when she's wrapped in his arms.

A DANGEROUS PROPOSAL...

Determined to possess the dark-haired beauty, Felix sets out to prove himself worthy of her love only to quickly discover Felicity's heart is the one thing he cannot steal. Having been hurt by men twice before, she doesn't trust the charming rake any further than she can throw him. But when she finds herself witness to a terrible crime, Felix is the only one she can turn to. Somehow she must find the courage to trust him with her heart...or risk losing her life.

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Readers,

Divorce, while technically legal in the Regency Era, was almost unheard of and very difficult to achieve. For the sake of fiction I've both sped up the process and glossed over a few of the finer details, but wanted to make a point of including them here.

There were many steps to getting a divorce. It was a long, messy, expensive, and VERY scandalous affair, which was why most couples chose to simply live apart from one another. Divorce required legal action in not one, but three courts.

First the aggrieved party (the husband) had to have a reason for the divorce. In most cases, it was adultery. The husband would then proceed with a criminal conversation (more commonly known as a crimcon) trial where he brought his wife's lover up on charges of trespassing (after all, a wife was the legal property of her husband). If the lover was found guilty, he would more likely than not be made to pay damages. Sometimes these damages were very high. Once that happened the husband was able to proceed with a legal separation which required a second trial. This was very similar to the crimcon, except this time the wife was present. If she was found guilty of adultery, the husband would then petition Parliament to pass a bill legally declaring the marriage dissolved. Then and only then would divorce be granted.

As you can see, this was no simple affair. And it was also very public. By the end the wife's reputation would have been completely ruined, and

the husband's would have also likely been damaged.

I hope you can forgive me for not including all of these details (that would have been a book in and of itself!) and I sincerely hope you enjoy the time you're about to spend with Felix and Felicity.

Warmest Regards,

Jillian

PROLOGUE I

Eight Years Ago

Grosvenor Square, London

AS GLITTERING DEBUTANTES DANCED below him, Felix Spencer pursued a different sort of glitter in the private bedchamber of Lady Dunmore, the newly married wife of Lord Dunmore, Earl of He Didn't Give a Shite.

Their names and titles were of little importance to Felix. It did not matter to him who they were. It mattered what they had. And if the glimpse he'd caught of Lady Dunmore riding through Hyde Park two days ago was any indication, they had quite a bit.

She had been weighed down by so many jewels it was a small miracle she'd managed to stay on her horse. The poor woman was one more necklace away from ending up face-down in the dirt. All things considered, he was about to do her a favor.

"There ye go," he murmured when the tumbler on the lock he'd been picking fell into place with a satisfying *click*. If there was a better sound in the entire world, he'd yet to hear it. Even a wench's scream of pleasure did not compare. Although depending on the wench in question, it did come rather close.

He slowly opened the lid to Lady Dunmore's jewelry box and let out

a long, low whistle of appreciation when he saw the treasures she had hidden inside. Picking up a diamond choker set on a green velvet ribbon, he held it above his head, admiring its elegant beauty as silver moonlight reflected off each individual facet. Some said diamonds were cold, but for Felix they had always held the most heat.

He slipped the choker into the inside pocket of his coat where it was quickly joined by an emerald bracelet, sapphire earrings cut in the shape of a tear, two rings, and a ruby brooch the size of his bloody fist. There was more. There was so much more. But never let it be said he was a greedy bastard. He may not have given what he stole to the poor – bollocks on that – but he never took from those who could not afford it.

When he was satisfied by the weight of his pockets, Felix exited the manor the same way he'd entered it.

Through the front door.

No one gave him so much as a second glance as he cut through the thick swath of ladies and lords in their fancy ball gowns and showy tailcoats. Servants were beneath their notice, and in his navy blue livery jacket and powdered wig he looked just like all the other poor blokes forced to stand at attention and serve watered down champagne to self-entitled nabobs.

He was nearly free of the ballroom when his gaze was inexplicably drawn to a delicate brunette standing beside her mother. They were at least fifteen paces apart from one another with half a dozen bodies between them, but even from a distance Felix could tell she was a beauty.

There was an elegance in the way she held herself. A soft, graceful poise that set her apart from every other young woman in the room. And unlike the other debutantes who had their noses stuck up so high in the air it was a wonder they could see where they were going, she looked nervous. Endearingly so.

For a moment he considered going to her. But even if his pockets weren't filled with a small fortune in stolen jewels, he was a commoner and she was a lady. Worse yet, he was a commoner dressed as a footman.

The truth of it was there were some things even he couldn't take, no matter how appealing they might have been. So with an amiable shrug he put the brunette out of his mind and set off on his way, content with his night's work.

Little did Felix know that their paths would one day cross again... and when they did he would not walk away with a shrug, but with a kiss.

"SOMETHING YOU MUST ALWAYS remember my dear," Mrs. Atwood murmured as she stood beside her daughter in the crowded ballroom, "is that a woman is not defined by who she is, but rather who she marries."

Felicity absorbed her mother's advice with a stiff nod while she watched a couple swirl past, the soles of their shoes clicking in perfect unison on the tiled marble. The woman danced with an effortless grace, the lace hem of her rose colored gown barely sweeping the floor. The man's movements were more precise and rigid, but no less

impressive as the *valse* required perfection in every step. Without it pandemonium was certain to ensue which was one of the reasons Felicity had not yet ventured onto the dance floor.

There was a very big difference between practicing the waltz at home in the sturdy arms of her tutor and performing it in front of two hundred of her peers. While she was not prone to stumbling or losing her rhythm – she was, in fact, quite graceful – she still found the idea of being twirled about by a complete stranger rather daunting.

What if she tripped and fell flat on her face? Worse yet, what if she caused her partner to trip? She would be humiliated and her first season would end before it ever really had a chance to begin! If only Scarlett were here. Her dearest friend would know what to do. Scarlett *always* knew what to do. But having just recently become a bride she was away on her honeymoon and not due to return for at least another month, leaving Felicity completely on her own.

Worrying her bottom lip between her teeth as a dog might a bone, she lifted her dance card and glanced down at the signatures she'd gathered upon her arrival. The first three lines were blank – traffic had been very cumbersome – but the fourth belonged to one Lord Ezra Whitten, Viscount of Ashburn. She vaguely recalled him as a tall, thin man with dark hair and dark eyes. Of all the names on her card his was the most promising. Not only because he was a viscount, but because he was the closest to her in age.

With only a small dowry and no one in her family of significant note or importance, Felicity knew she could not afford to be picky. But she did prefer her husband not be confused for her father or,

worse yet, her *grandfather*. She shuddered ever-so-slightly at the thought and earned herself both a glance of mild reproof and a warning squeeze on her forearm.

“Young ladies do not fidget,” Mrs. Atwood said with quiet firmness. “Chin up, my dear. And do try not to look as though you are a small animal standing before the jaws of a lion. While men enjoy shyness to some degree, they do not want a wife who swoons at the drop of a hat.”

“I am not going to swoon,” Felicity protested. At least, she did not *think* she was going to swoon. Having never done so before she had no idea what the symptoms were. Was a pounding heart one of them? Pressing a gloved hand over her chest she felt an alarmingly fast *bump, bump, bump* beneath her fingertips, like an urgent fist knocking against a door.

Oh dear.

Her cheeks paled as she imagined slowly collapsing amidst a swirl of muslin and lace with everyone looking on. Now *that* would be humiliating and not something easily lived down.

Scarlett would certainly never let her forget it, and neither would the *ton*. She would become The Girl Who Fainted, and the moniker would follow her around until the ends of her days, proceeding every room she entered and every word she spoke.

“Of course you are not going to swoon.” Mrs. Atwood spoke very matter-of-factly, as if stating something out loud made it true. “That would be terribly unseemly. Unless,” she said, thoughtfully tapping her finger against the end of her chin, “you were to swoon at the feet

of a duke, in which case it may go in our favor as he would be required to attend you.” Her eyes brightened. “Do you see any dukes about?”

“*Mother.*” Felicity regarded the petite brunette standing beside her with equal parts affection and exasperation. Were it not for the threads of gray in Mrs. Atwood’s hair or the lines that creased the corners of her eyes when she smiled, they might have been sisters. Both of them shared the same willowy stature, sleek hair dark as a mink’s coat, and violet eyes. Felicity’s were tip-tilted at the corners like a cat, adding a hint of exotic beauty to her English rose complexion.

“What?” Mrs. Atwood blinked. “Oh, do not look at me like that. It would not be the first time a young woman threw herself at a duke, nor would it be the last. How do you think Lady Evelyn managed to get a proposal out of the Duke of Willowbrook?”

“He fell in love with her?” Felicity ventured.

“Oh, my dear, darling girl.” Mrs. Atwood’s tittering laugh drew the attention of two wallflowers. The taller of the two briefly met Felicity’s gaze before they both ducked back behind a large potted fern. “No one marries for love.”

“You and Father did.”

“Well yes, that is true.” She pursed her lips. “Although given that it was an arranged marriage we could have just as likely despised one another. You never know with those things. Thank heavens they’ve fallen out of favor.”

It was nearly impossible for Felicity to imagine her parents at odds.

She had never witnessed an unkind word spoken between them. On the contrary, they often acted more like newlyweds than a couple that had just celebrated their twentieth wedding anniversary. Their affection for one another was rather embarrassing – especially when they touched each other's hands in public – but Felicity appreciated the fact that their marriage was unique. It may have begun as an arrangement, but over time it had blossomed into something so much more. Something she wanted for herself one day. Unfortunately, given the dismal state of her dance card, things were not looking very promising.

“Miss Atwood?”

Felicity visibly startled at the sound of her name and glanced to her left where she discovered Lord Ezra Whitten, Viscount of Ashburn, gazing down at her in wordless expectation.

The viscount had long sideburns and a narrow face. In fact, everything about him was quite narrow, from his jaw to his shoulders to his very stance. As a result his clothes were a tad ill-fitting, not that Felicity paid any mind to such things. She preferred to look to the heart of a person to find out who they were, not the cut of their waistcoat or the fabric of their trousers.

“Y-yes?” Mortified to have stuttered, she gulped in a mouthful of air, straightened her spine, and tried again. “Yes, my lord?”

The tiniest hint of a smile broke the severe line of his mouth. “I believe I have the next dance? If Mrs. Atwood has no objections, that is.” His gaze slid to Felicity's mother who immediately shook her head.

“None at all, Lord Ashburn. None at all.”

But Felicity hesitated when he held out his arm. “Is the next dance a *valse*, by any chance?”

“Cotillion, I believe.”

Her shoulders visibly relaxed. “Excellent.”

Ashburn led her onto the dance floor. As the music swelled they stepped seamlessly into a circle comprised of three other couples. Despite her fear of falling flat on her face, Felicity moved flawlessly through the dance, switching partners with the airy grace of a winged fairy. When the cotillion ended as it had begun – in a circle – everyone bowed or curtsied. Her cheeks flushed a dull pink, Felicity turned towards Ashburn with a breathless smile.

“You dance very well, my lord.”

“As do you.” His own smile was much more reserved, but Felicity felt a thrill of pleasure at having managed to extract it, for she had a feeling Lord Ashburn was not a jovial man by nature. When he asked if she would care to take a turn about the room her pleasure deepened, as did the color in her cheeks.

“Yes, I would enjoy that very much.”

Ashburn dutifully held out his arm and she slipped her own through it, fingers resting lightly on the sleeve of his black tailcoat. It was the closest she had ever been to a man who was not a familial relation and butterflies swarmed her belly, their wings beating with equal parts excitement and nervousness.

She wanted to ask Lord Ashburn a hundred questions, but the rules of polite society dictated she wait for him to speak, and as Felicity was

nothing if not polite she kept her lips pressed firmly together while he escorted her past a long line of glass doors that led out to a stone terrace. One of the doors had been propped open and a welcome breeze fanned across Felicity's face as they walked by, bringing with it the scent of earthy soil, moonlight, and perfume.

It wasn't until they had nearly completed their circuit that Lord Ashburn finally spoke, leading Felicity to wonder if he'd been summoning his courage or if he was merely a man of few words. Either way, she rather liked that he did not need to fill the silence between them with random prattle about the weather or hunting or whatever it was men liked to talk about when they had nothing to say.

"Is this your first London Season, Miss Atwood?" He kept his attention focused forward but she caught the dark sweep of his pupils as he glanced in her direction. Did he find her pleasing to look at? She hoped so. While Lord Ashburn was not as dashing nor as handsome as Scarlett's husband Lord Sherwood, he had a quiet, pensive way about him that brought to mind a scholar or a poet. She liked that he wasn't a foppish dandy like some of the other men circling the room. Men who were quick with a flowery compliment or an entertaining joke but were keenly lacking in depth and substance.

"It is." Her teeth sank into her bottom lip – a nervous habit no tutor had yet to quell – as she peeked up at him beneath her lashes. "Am I so very obvious?"

"Not at all." A frown tugged at the corners of Ashburn's mouth. "You... you conduct yourself quiet well, Miss Atwood. I would not have been surprised to learn this was your sixth season." Immediately

realizing his error, he hastened to correct himself. “Not to say you would ever need so many seasons as that to find a husband. I am sure any man in here would welcome your hand in marriage.”

Felicity bit back a smile. “That is the wish for every debutante, is it not?”

“One can only assume. Although I am convinced some attend merely for the dancing and the chance to sneak champagne while their chaperone is looking the other way. If I may be so bold...to which category would you place yourself in, Miss Atwood?”

“The former,” she said without hesitation. “To dance and socialize and sip champagne is all well and good, but I imagine it would grow wearisome after a time. I would much rather be at home with my husband.”

He stopped suddenly, so suddenly that had she not been holding on to his arm she surely would have stumbled, and turned to face her. To their right couples were beginning to flock into the middle of the floor, signaling the fifth dance was about to begin. Felicity paid them no mind. How could she, when Lord Ashburn was looking at her with such earnest intention in his deep, dark eyes?

“This is my third season, Miss Atwood. I have taken many turns about the room with many different women but I have never...that is to say I have not...”

“Felt like this before?” she breathed.

Ashburn’s face flushed a dull, mottled red. “Indeed. You are the rarest kind of woman, Miss Atwood. The kind who is as beautiful on the inside as she is on the out. It was never my intention to be so

forward, but I fear if I do not say something now I will lose my chance and be burdened with the heavy weight of regret for the rest of my days. Might I have your permission to call on you tomorrow afternoon?”

“Yes.” It was a marvelous example of considerable self-restraint that Felicity did not shout the word to the rooftops. The butterflies in her belly flew up and began to spin round and round as if caught by a wild gale. “Yes, you have my permission, Lord Ashburn.”

He did not smile. Not quite. But there was an unmistakable warmth in the hard lines of his countenance that had not been there when he’d first asked her to dance. Crossing his arm in front of his body, he bent forward into a rigid bow. “I dare look forward to the day you might call me Ezra, Miss Atwood.”

Felicity angled one dainty foot in front of the other and sank into a deep curtsy. “As do I, Lord Ashburn. As do I.”

EXACTLY FOUR MONTHS LATER, with the blessing of Mr. and Mrs. Atwood, Lord Ashburn asked for their daughter’s hand in marriage. Six months after their engagement was announced – they’d wanted to wait until spring – Felicity and Ezra were wed. Two years into their marriage they welcomed a son they named Henry for Ezra’s grandfather. When Henry was four they became parents again, this time to a chubby-cheeked baby girl they called Anne.

And then, precisely one week before Anne turned two years of age, Ezra went to his wife and coldly informed her they were getting a divorce.

PROLOGUE II

Eight Months Ago

Sherwood Country Estate

(excerpted from *A Dangerous Seduction*)

“ANNE, PLEASE PUT THAT DOWN. Henry, do *not* climb on that! Oh for heaven’s sake,” Felicity cried in exasperation as she leapt forward and caught a vase just as it began to topple off the bookshelf her six-year-old son was dangling from. “Outside,” she ordered, pointing at the door. “Nanny will get you dressed.”

Anne’s little mouth fell open. “But—”

“No,” Felicity said with a firm shake of her head. “No ‘buts’ or ‘ands’ or ‘ifs’. You are going outside, and that is final.”

Henry snickered. “You said butts!”

“There are two different kinds of – never mind. Darcy, can you please be a dear and take the children? Hats and cloaks, I think. It is still a bit chilly and I do not want them to catch a cold.”

“But o’course, me lady.” Her Irish accent rolling off her tongue, Felicity’s nanny hurried forward and clapped her hands to get the children’s attention. Darcy may have been a young woman of only sixteen with a spattering of freckles that made her appear even younger, but she had a way with children that went well beyond her years. “Come along, Master Henry and Lady Anne. Give your blessed mother some peace and quiet.”

‘*Thank you*’ Felicity mouthed as her two little hellions were led away. She waited in the parlor until she heard the front door close and then it was a mad dash up the stairs and into her bedchamber for, as Darcy had so eloquently put it, some blessed peace and quiet.

Felicity loved her children. There was nothing in the world more important, and without them she did not know how she would have gotten through her very public and very humiliating divorce. But there were times – like this morning – when she wanted to wring their beautiful little necks.

Crossing to her writing desk, she sat down in a large velvet chair and picked up her goose feather quill. Tapping it thoughtfully against the side of her cheek for a few moments before dipping it in the inkwell, she crafted a short letter to her mother letting her know that things were ‘going splendidly’ and there was ‘no cause for concern’ and that she would visit ‘very, very soon’.

All lies, of course.

Things were *not* going splendidly and there *was* a great cause for concern and she *wouldn’t* be visiting anytime in the near future, but she saw no reason to worry her mother.

Finishing the letter with her customary signature, she blew across the paper to dry the ink before folding it into a neat square and tucking the square inside an envelope. When a quick search of her desk did not turn up a wax seal she went to look for one in Scarlett’s room.

With her thoughts on other things and her head bowed, she did not immediately see the man crouching in front of the dresser. Since his

back was to her and the sound of her steps were muffled by the thick rug he did not see her either. In fact, neither one of them saw the other until they were practically right on top of each other.

“Oh! I am terribly sorry,” Felicity exclaimed. “I did not realize Lady Sherwood’s bedchamber was still being cleaned... You’re not a servant!” By the time she realized the stranger staring up at her with the most arresting pair of amber eyes she’d ever seen was not, in fact, a member of the staff it was too late. With uncanny speed he had a hand over her mouth and an arm wrapped around her narrow ribcage before she could so much as utter a scream.

“Easy love,” he murmured, his breath tickling her ear as he held her snug against his chest. “No one has to get hurt. Ye weren’t about to yell for help, were ye?”

Tears gathered in the corners of Felicity’s eyes as she shook her head from side to side.

“That’s what I thought. So here’s what we’re going to do, love. Are ye listening?”

She nodded.

“That’s a bright lass. Now I’m going to slowly remove my hand and then you’re going to go sit on that chair in the corner. Do ye see it? Good,” he purred when she nodded again. “You’re not going to scream or try to run or cause a fuss. Are ye love?”

“No,” Felicity gasped when he loosened the hand covering her mouth. “I’ll be quiet. I promise. But my children –”

“Are outside with their nanny. Go on, then.” He gave her a not-so-gentle push and she stumbled forward, catching herself on one of the

bedposts. For a second she considered making a run for the door. It was so temptingly close. Only a few feet at most. But the stranger must have been able to read her mind because his eyes suddenly narrowed and he pointed directly at the chair. “Sit,” he said, commanding her as if she were a dog. “Now.”

With her heartbeat thrumming in her ears Felicity hurried to do as he asked, not wanting to incite his anger. Drying her tears with the cuff of her spencer jacket, she forced herself to take several deep, even breaths. Falling into hysteria wouldn’t help her children. For their sake – and her own – she needed to keep a calm, level head. Who knew when they might return inside, or what this horrible man would do to them if they did?

To look at him one would not immediately think he was horrible. He was of medium height and build with brown hair that held just the tiniest curl and long sideburns that extended all the way down to a narrow chin. There was nothing very distinguishing about his features, save a bulge in his nose that hinted at violence and those vivid eyes that were the color of warm gold. But then Felicity knew better than most that men had a way of hiding their deepest, darkest selves behind a charming smile and a charismatic demeanor.

As she watched him move from Scarlett’s dresser to her large jewelry box, she was reminded of a fox. Sly, cunning, and sleekly handsome.

Bold as you please he pried open the lid and began sifting through the dozens of glittering necklaces, bracelets, and earrings, all of which were worth a considerable fortune.

Scarlett was going to be so angry.

“You’re a thief then,” she said.

“I used to be,” he replied cheerfully even as he picked up an emerald hair comb, whistled under his breath, and tucked it into the pocket of his jacket. “Now I am more of a... *connoisseur* of fine things.”

“That is the same thing as a thief!” “Is it?” His head canted to the side as he thought it over before he shrugged and lifted up a long string of pearls. “I suppose it is.” Biting down lightly on one of the pearls he shook his head and dropped them onto the floor where they coiled around his boot like an ivory snake. “I never take anything from people who cannot afford to lose it.”

“That does not make it right.”

“Ah,” he said, lifting a finger. “But does it make it completely wrong?”

“Yes!” she cried indignantly. “Yes, it does.”

“Well, to each their own I suppose.” A gold ring followed the emerald hair comb into his pocket before his eyebrows shot up. “What have we here?” Digging to the bottom of the jewelry box he closed his fist around something and pulled it out. Holding his hand flat, he uncurled his fingers one at a time to reveal a large sapphire earring surrounded by tiny diamonds.

“Do ye recognize this?” he asked.

Felicity gave the earring only the most cursory of glances before she turned her head to the side and looked deliberately at the far wall. “I am not helping you.”

He approached her with slow, catlike strides. Taking her chin between his thumb and pointer finger he steadily applied pressure until she had no choice but to look up. When she finally met his hard amber gaze she sucked in a startled breath, stunned by the transformation that had taken place.

Gone was the affable rake with the charming grin. In his place stood a cold-eyed criminal with a stare so fierce it sent chills racing down her spine.

“I’ll ask ye one more time, love.” His silky voice slid across her skin like fingertips, lifting the downy hairs on the nape of her neck as she shuddered with fear. “Have ye seen this earring before?”

“I – I am not certain.” Tears sprang to her eyes. “Why does it matter? Don’t!” she gasped when he suddenly reached for her face, but instead of striking her he used his thumb to catch a tear trembling on the edge of her lash.

“Don’t cry,” he said gruffly as his gaze inexplicably softened. “I’m not going to hurt ye.”

“Why – why would I believe a thief?”

“Because I’m no’ a thief.” And just like that his cocky grin was back. “I’m a connoisseur of fine things.” He released his grip on her chin and gave a rueful shake of his head. “I always did have a soft spot for the pretty ones and you’re prettier than most. What’s your name, love?”

“F-Felicity Atwood,” she whispered. After the divorce she had decided to return to her maiden name, wanting no link to exist between herself and Ezra aside from their children. Children he no

longer claimed as his own even though little Anne, with her dark hair and big hazel eyes, was his spitting image.

“Is there a Mr. Atwood I should be concerned about?” The wicked gleam in his eyes caused Felicity’s breath to catch yet again, although this time it was for an entirely different reason. When he looked at her like that she felt warm all over, as if she’d suddenly stepped into a pool of sunlight. Which did not make any sense give her present set of circumstances. She should have felt terrified, not tingly! And part of her *was* still very much afraid, but there was another part that was intrigued by the thief with the golden eyes and the devilish grin and the soft spot in his heart for a woman’s tears.

“No,” she murmured, forcing herself to look away from his intoxicating gaze. Surely she had enough problems without adding a criminal to the mix. No matter how handsome and charismatic he may have been. “I am not married.”

At least not any longer.

“Then it is truly a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” As if they were meeting in a fancy ballroom instead of a bedroom he had no right to be in, the thief bent at the waist in an exaggerated bow complete with an arm flourish. “I’m Felix. Felix Spencer. Now I have to ask you again, love – have you seen this before?” Going back to the dresser he picked up the sapphire earring and held it up.

“Yes,” she admitted after a pause. “Yes I have.”

Scarlett had worn the earring when she’d married Rodger. It was the first – and the only – time Felicity had ever seen it aside from today.

“Then ye are certain this earring belongs to Lady Sherwood?” Tossing the earring high in the air he caught it with an easy flick of his wrist.

“Yes, of course.” She gave him a pointed look. “That is her jewelry box you are rifling through.”

“So it is,” he said with a sly grin. “When was the last time ye saw her wear it?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Just answer the question love.” He rolled the earring across his knuckles. “When did ye last see Lady Sherwood with this fancy bit of blue dangling from her ear?”

Felicity folded her hands neatly in her lap. “I am not answering your question until you answer mine. What is so special about that particular earring? Why do you want to know when Scarlett wore it?” Her eyes narrowed. “This would not have anything to do with Captain Steel, would it?”

Though she hadn’t done it on purpose, Felicity had overheard enough bits and pieces of Scarlett and Owen’s conversation in the parlor to know that Rodger’s death was being investigated as a murder...and Owen considered Scarlett to be a suspect.

“Are you a Runner as well?” she pressed. “What do you want with Scarlett? She hasn’t done anything, you know.”

“It’s not what *I* want.” Felix slipped the earring into his pocket. “It’s what *he* wants.”

“You mean Captain Steel? That is who you are referring to, is it not?”

“I am sure I don’t have any idea what ye are talking about, love.” They both froze when the sound of voices rose up from the foyer. “Time to leave.”

Finally, thought Felicity as she breathed a quiet sigh of relief. But when Felix went to the window and threw it open her relief quickly turned to alarm. “You cannot go out that way!” she gasped, jumping up out of her chair. “We are on the second floor! You’ll kill yourself.”

Felix’s teeth flashed in a wicked grin as he looked back at her over his shoulder. “Worried about me, love?”

“No. Yes. *No*.” Flustered, she wrung her hands together. “There is – there is a beautiful patch of azaleas outside that window and I don’t want you to ruin them.”

“Best give me a kiss for good luck then.”

“What?” Her cheeks paled. “No! That isn’t–”

But before she could finish her protest Felix had yanked her against his body and pressed his mouth to hers in a kiss that made her see stars.

It only lasted a few seconds. Three at the most. Yet when it was finished Felicity felt as if she’d been kissed for hours. Stumbling back a step she pressed a finger to her lips and watched dazedly as Felix climbed up onto the windowsill, perching on the narrow ledge with the balance of a cat.

“Until next time, love.”

“Wait!” she cried.

But with a wink and an arrogant tilt of his chin he disappeared.

Her heart in her throat Felicity ran across the room, terrified of

what she would see when she looked down. Summoning her courage – and bracing herself for the worse – she peered out the window.

The azaleas were untouched...and Felix was gone.

CHAPTER ONE

Present Day - April, 1816

East End, London

(a very unfortunate place to be)

FELICITY STARED AT THE crooked wooden door and bit back a sob. Were she alone she might have sank to her knees, buried her head in her hands, and dissolved into tears. She could feel them stinging the corners of her eyelids like angry little hornets. But she was not alone.

Her children were with her, their small hands buried in the heavy folds of her skirt. She could feel them looking up at her. Waiting for what she would do. What she would say.

If she cried they would cry as well and then they would all be huddled on the sad little stoop crying together which absolutely would not do. For one thing it would attract unwanted attention, something which Felicity was trying very hard to avoid. Especially in this part of London with its narrow alleys and clustered tenements that housed all sorts of rabble and riffraff. For another she feared if she began crying she would not be able to stop. So she lifted her chin, plastered a smile on her face, and forced a lilting enthusiasm into her voice as she opened – or rather shoved – the door to their new home. A rather generous word to describe what awaited them.

“Look children!” she sang. “Isn’t it lovely?”

Even at six years of age Henry had the ability to look dubious. “It smells.”

Yes, Felicity thought silently as she ushered her children inside before firmly closing and locking the door behind them. *It certainly does.*

The rented flat, consisting of only two rooms, was old and dirty and stank like seawater left out to warm in the sun. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust including the meager collection of furniture which consisted of two chairs, a wobbly table, and one bed. There was a fireplace but it was backed up with soot. The floorboards creaked unmercifully. And what were those tiny brown pellets on the windowsill?

Oh heavens.

Was that – was that *rat* excrement?

“Do not touch anything,” she said sharply, grasping Anne’s hand just as her fingers were about to plunge into a pile of heaven only knew what.

“I don’t like it here.” Ever defiant, Henry pulled his hat off and threw it on the floor. “I want to go back to Aunt Scarlett’s!”

So did Felicity. Unfortunately, the country manor where they had been living since Ezra had unceremoniously thrown all three of them out on their ear was no longer in Scarlett’s possession. After Lord Sherwood’s will had been settled the estate had gone to some distant cousin who had a family of his own and no desire to provide for a woman and two young children tainted by scandal.

Scarlett had, of course, invited them to live with her and Owen, but Felicity had politely declined. Not only did Scarlett and Owen deserve time to themselves after a tumultuous courtship that had involved murder, treachery, and a deranged maid, but nearly half a year's worth of charity had left a bitter taste in Felicity's mouth. A person could only take so much before they began to feel like a burden and she did not want to be beholden to anyone.

Not to her oldest and dearest friend, who had just been through so much. Not to her mother, who was still desperately mourning her husband five years after his death. And certainly not to the man who had put her in this predicament to begin with. A man who was no doubt, at this very moment, enjoying his tea over a light breakfast of toast and poached eggs while his wife sat across from him in the very same chair Felicity had once called her own. Thus she and the children found themselves taking up residence in a dirty, dingy flat far from the fashionable townhome in Grosvenor Square where she had become a wife, a mother, and, ultimately, a social pariah.

Divorce in England, while legal, was almost unheard of. It was far better for all parties involved to simply live apart and conduct completely separate lives. The wife in the country with the children, the husband in town with his mistress. That was the way it had been done since... well, since forever. But Ezra – selfish, unfeeling bastard that he was – had wanted to *marry* his mistress. Since he'd already been married – to Felicity – that had posed a bit of a problem. One he had solved by divorcing her, disowning their children, and going on about his life as if she and Henry and sweet little Anne had never

existed.

She'd had no say in it. None at all. And now she was completely ruined, her reputation in tatters and her life all but destroyed, while Ezra had escaped with only a proverbial rap on his knuckles. The unfairness and injustice of it all angered her beyond reason, but there was nothing she could do. Nothing but keep her chin up, keep her darling children close, and keep putting one foot in front of the other.

"Henry, please pick up your hat."

A belligerent gleam in his bright green eyes, Henry folded his arms and stomped his foot. "You said not to touch anything."

"I did not mean – very well. Leave it if that is what you want to do." Too weary to argue, Felicity pinched the bridge of her nose and drew a deep breath as she prayed for patience. In addition to losing her husband and her home, she'd also been forced to give up her beloved nanny. At times like these it was Darcy she missed most of all.

The young, energetic Irish girl had had a wonderful way with the children, especially Henry. But nannies could not work for free and Darcy had been forced to find another family when Felicity had been unable to continue paying her.

"Shall we have a treat and then unpack our belongings?" Rummaging inside her reticule, she pulled out two sugar sticks.

"Yum!" Anne said enthusiastically as she plucked one stick out of her mother's hand and immediately popped it into her mouth. Sucking vigorously she wandered over to the window, leaving a pitter-patter of dusty footprints in her wake.

"Here you are, Henry." Felicity knelt down and coaxed her son

forward with a smile. “Don’t you want it? I thought these were your favorite.”

But her son, who was far more observant than her daughter, noted the lines of strain creasing the corners of Felicity’s mouth and shook his head. “I don’t want a stupid old sugar stick. I want Father and Aunt Scarlett and Nanny!”

“Of course you do. Of course.” There was anger in Henry’s face, but there was uncertainty there as well, and it was the uncertainty and the fear and the sadness that Felicity appealed to when she opened her arms. After a moment’s hesitation he ran into them and burrowed his face in the crook of her shoulder, clinging to her neck with all the strength his small body could muster.

“There now.” Her heart ached when she felt him tremble. And it cracked wide open when she heard him sniffle. “There now,” she repeated softly, stroking his back with loving hands. “There now, my darling boy. It will be all right. We will see Aunt Scarlett tomorrow, and we will plan an outing with Nanny as soon as we can. I promise.”

“I’m sorry, Mama.”

“There is nothing to be sorry for.”

Anne toddled over, what remained of her sugar stick firmly lodged in her cheek, and wiggled between them. “Pawk?” she said brightly, tugging on Felicity’s sleeve. “Howsies? Pawk?”

“That is a splendid idea.” Felicity kissed both of their brows before she stood up. “We shall have to walk there, but it shouldn’t be very far. Do you remember what I told you?”

“Stay close,” Henry said solemnly.

“Stay cwise,” Anne echoed.

“And?”

“Do not talk to strangers.”

She skimmed her hand across Henry’s head, fingers sliding through the golden locks that were so very different from Ezra’s dark hair.

“Very good. We will–”

A brisk knock sounded at the door. Immediately Felicity gathered her children close and then pushed them behind her. She was not expecting anyone. With the exception of Scarlett, no one even knew where they were.

“Hewo?” Anne trilled, her mother’s warning not to talk to strangers already blissfully forgotten. She began to jump up and down, waving her half-eaten sugar stick in excitement. “Hewo! Hewo!”

“Henry, take your sister into the other room and close the door,” Felicity directed tersely. For once her son did not argue but rather grabbed Anne by the arm and pulled her into the bedroom. Felicity took a deep breath, her hand sliding into her reticule and emerging with a small, sharp knife.

She was not a fighter. She never had been. But if it meant defending her children she would battle the devil himself until he stole her last breath...or she stole his.

“Who is it?” she demanded, her voice solid and strong despite the erratic racing of her pulse. Were she in her townhouse in Grosvenor Square she wouldn’t have thought anything of an unexpected visitor. The footman would have ushered them in to the parlor where they would have dined on tea and scones while they waited for her to

arrive. But here, tucked away amidst the desperate and the downtrodden, there were no footmen or parlors or scones to be had. There was only herself, and her children, and whoever waited for them on the other side of the door.

The old brass knob began to turn. There was a soft, subtle click as the lock was picked. Knowing she would only have the element of surprise for a few scarce seconds, Felicity gathered her courage, raised the knife, and sprang forward. She caught a glimpse of startled amber eyes before her wrist was caught in a vice-like grip and her only weapon went clattering to the floor. She cried out as she was spun around and pinned up against a man's chest.

A very hard, very *familiar* chest.

"Felix Spencer," she choked the name out as the thief-turned-Bow-Street-Runner loosened his hold. Stumbling forward, she caught herself on the back of a chair and whirled to face him, violet eyes flashing with anger and indignation. "What are *you* doing here?"

He lifted a tawny brow. "Isn't it obvious, love? I've come to rescue ye."

CHAPTER TWO

“I DO NOT NEED RESCUING.” Tilting her chin, Felicity glared up at Felix. The Runner grinned down at her, a handsome rogue with golden eyes, wavy hair several shades lighter than her own, and a devilish grin that had no doubt been the downfall of more than one respectable lady. He had the leanly muscled body of a thoroughbred, but the gleam of sly cunning in those warm amber eyes was all fox.

Pesky creatures, foxes.

They were beautiful to look at when they were trotting across an open field, but no one wanted to find a fox in their henhouse.

Nor in their rented flat, Felicity thought silently.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Spencer?” Of all the people that could have showed up on her doorstep, he was the one she least wanted to see.

Try as she might, she hadn’t been able to stop thinking about the kiss he had stolen from her. Or the small, insignificant, not-even-worth-mentioning fact that she had kissed him back.

It may have only been for a few seconds, but those few seconds had been playing in her mind on an endless loop for the past eight months. It certainly hadn’t helped matters that she’d seen him again at Scarlett

and Owen's wedding. He hadn't kissed her, but the arresting way he'd stared at her across the room had been far more intimate than any swift brush of the lips.

Rather like he was looking at her right now.

His possessive gaze made her feel hot and breathless, as if it were the middle of summer instead of the beginning of spring and she was stuck in a parlor without any open windows. She started to fan a hand in front of her face, caught herself, and swiftly tucked her arms behind her back instead, fingers knotting tightly together. "I do not recall requiring the services of a Runner."

"I'm here off the books, such as it were." Kneeling, Felix picked up the knife she'd dropped. Weak morning sunlight reflected off the small silver blade as he tossed it from one hand to the other. "What were you going to do with this sewing needle? Pare an apple?"

"It is perfectly sharp, thank you very much, and I would like it back."

"You're going to hurt yourself with it."

"I am going to hurt *you* if you do not leave this very minute." Felicity blinked, taken aback at her own words. She was not a confrontational person. In fact, she couldn't recall a single time where she'd ever stood up to anyone, let alone threatened them with violence. When Ezra had informed her he was beginning divorce proceedings she hadn't even raised her voice. Which, in hindsight, was something she very much regretted. If only she could go back to that morning...

The day Ezra told her they would be divorcing had begun as any

other. She had gotten dressed in her bedchamber listening to the happy chatter of her children in the nursery across the hall. As soon as her green muslin dress was buttoned and her dark hair was swept up in a tidy chignon she went right into the nursery, just like she always did.

Henry was too busy building one of his beloved wooden towers to even glance up in her direction when she walked in, but Anne's face lit up like the sweetest of candles when she saw her mother. With a squeal of delight she toddled across the sun washed room as fast as her little legs could carry her.

"Mama! Here you are! I found you," she trilled excitedly. "Up, up, up!"

Felicity scooped her daughter up into her arms and nuzzled her sweet cheeks as she carried her over to Henry so they could both admire his tower.

"And what is it we are building today?" she asked, moving Anne to her hip.

"A fort." His mouth puckered in studious concentration, Henry carefully stacked his blocks around six tin soldiers. "The French are invading again."

"Not again," she said gravely. "Best secure your defenses and draw the bridge up quickly."

Henry tilted his head back. "I *am*, Mum. They won't get my soldiers this time!"

"That's what I like to hear." Setting Anne down, she leaned forward, sweeping back his soft golden curls so she could press her

lips to his forehead. “Keep at it, darling. You’re doing a marvelous job. The French have no idea what they are up against.” Her attention switched to Darcy who was throwing toys into a bin. “I was thinking a walk through the park this afternoon if it does not rain. Can you see to it the children are ready and dressed at half past eleven?”

“But o’course, me lady.” The nanny’s heavy Irish brogue rolled pleasantly off her tongue. She sat back on her heels. “Will his lordship be accompanying us?”

“If he is not too busy with his other obligations, I am certain Lord Ashburn would love nothing more than to join his family.” Her bright smile did not fool Darcy in the least, but then it wasn’t for her. Henry and Anne were still blissfully unaware of how disinterested their father was in them and she fully intended to keep it that way for as long as possible. “I will be certain to ask him at breakfast. Speaking of which, I should leave. Ezra does not like it when I dawdle. Be good for Nanny,” she instructed the children. “I will see you soon.”

“Bye Mum,” Henry said distractedly.

Anne waved both hands in the air. “Bye!” she called cheerfully. “Bye, bye!”

Ezra was already waiting for her in the dining room. He was standing beside his chair at the head of the table, one hand resting on top of it while the other was held stiffly behind his back. He looked annoyed, but as his perpetual expression was always one of annoyance Felicity thought nothing of it.

There were times that she wished her husband possessed a better sense of humor – or any sense, for that matter – but she’d known who

he was when she agreed to marry him, hadn't she? And aside from a few threads of gray in his hair he had not changed in the past eight years.

But she was beginning to fear she had.

"You are three minutes late," he remarked when she entered the room and took her seat at the far end of the table. She'd always thought it a bit foolish to sit so far apart when it was only the two of them, but Ezra was nothing if not a stickler for propriety.

"I was with the children. Henry is building yet another fort. It's the French this time, I am afraid. They are attacking full bore."

"How fascinating," Ezra said in such a way that suggested he did not find it fascinating at all.

"Yes. Quite." Dropping her gaze to the table so she wouldn't have to see how tedious Ezra found it to discuss their children, she busied her hands with straightening her already straight silverware. "It appears as though Anne grew another two inches overnight. She will need new shoes soon, as well as a few dresses. I thought tomorrow I would take her to Madame Dilliard's if you wanted to do something with Henry."

"No."

"Come now Ezra," she coaxed, glancing up at him with a soft smile. "Henry has been talking for weeks how he would like to try sailing his pond yacht. Heaven knows I haven't the faintest idea how to do it, but you—"

"You misunderstand," her husband said flatly. "No, I am not going to spend another second of my time with that boy and no, you will not be purchasing Anne so much as a single stocking. Unless you are

prepared to do so with your own money which I find rather doubtful as you haven't any."

Felicity's smile froze. "I am terribly sorry. What did you say?"

Without another word Ezra pulled out his chair and sat down. Unfolding his napkin, he took his time spreading it over his lap before he met her stunned gaze across the ridiculously long table and said, "I see no point in repeating myself. It is obvious you heard me or you would not be looking at me like that. We are getting a divorce and I am disowning the children."

He spoke so calmly, so *normally*, that several seconds passed before the enormity of what he'd said managed to sink in. When it did – when she realized what he was proposing – Felicity jumped out of her chair as though it had suddenly caught fire.

"You – you cannot be serious," she sputtered.

Ezra merely lifted a brow. "Have you ever known me not to be serious?"

"But I am your *wife*. And they – they are your *children*."

"Well at least one of them is," he said coldly. "Although even that remains in question."

Felicity stumbled back as though she'd been dealt a physical blow. The ground shifted beneath her feet, forcing her to grab the back of her chair or risk falling to her knees. "You said we would never have to discuss it again," she whispered. "You said it was over. You said–"

"I know what I said." He no longer looked annoyed. He looked vaguely pitying, which was a thousand times worse. "However, I regret to say I have fallen in love with someone else. Someone who is

far more suitable.”

“Far more suitable than the woman you are already married to?” Felicity gripped the chair so hard her knuckles were leached of all color. “Ezra, please—”

“I find this discussion distasteful. I do not want a divorce any more than you. The scandal it will cause...” His mouth curled. “Unfortunately, you have left me with no other choice.”

“I’ve left—”

“*Enough.*” The word reverberated around the dining room like a gunshot. “I am going to Parliament this afternoon to petition for a divorce. There will be a short trial, which you will be required to attend.”

“On what grounds?” she said softly, more to herself than to him.

“Speak up. You know I detest it when you mutter.”

“I asked on what grounds.” She lifted her chin. “On what grounds could you possibly be requesting a divorce?”

Ezra’s stare was as cold and unflinching as the act he was committing. “Adultery, Felicity. You will be brought up on charges of adultery.”

TO THIS VERY DAY Felicity hated herself for making it so *easy* for Ezra. Even in the midst of the trial when she had been forced to sit before a roomful of men she did not know and listen to her character being torn asunder she had been a dutiful wife.

She had not argued. She had not cried. She had not even whispered so much as a word of protest. And what had her good behavior gotten

her? What had being a *dutiful wife* gotten her?

A reputation destroyed by scandal and a dirty two room flat in a square of London she never would have dared walk through before the divorce, let alone dreamed of living.

The cold, cruel irony of it filled her with both anger and bewilderment. All of her life she had followed the rules and minded her manners and always, always behaved as a well-bred lady should. Where had she gone wrong? What else could she have done? Why had all of these bad things happened to *her*, of all people? It simply wasn't fair...but then life rarely was. Hadn't she learned that difficult lesson seven years ago while trapped in a bedroom with a man who was not her husband? A man with Henry's blond hair and green eyes...

"Where are the little nippers?" Felix's gaze swept the small room and Felicity immediately stiffened.

"My children are none of your concern."

"Relax, love. I'm not in the habit of harming babies. Or beautiful women, for that matter."

His wolfish grin made her teeth clench. "Your flattery falls on deaf ears, Mr. Spencer."

"Ah," he said softly as he stepped towards her with the coiled grace of an alley cat, "but would a kiss fall on deaf lips?"

"Stay back," she warned even as part of her yearned for him to do the exact opposite. Heaven help her, but she wanted to feel the weight of his hands on her body and know the taste of his lips on her mouth. She also wanted him to turn around and walk out the door and never come back. The conflicting feelings warred within her as the air

between them grew heavy and thick. Anticipation hummed like a finely plucked bow string, sending waves of delicious tension coursing down her spine.

She flinched when Felix reached out, but did not draw away. A rather curious reaction as she had always retreated, in some way or another, whenever Ezra touched her. But that was something to be considered when her breath was once again her own and her blood was not roaring in her ears and her heart was not racing fast as a hummingbird's wing.

"What – what are you doing?" she asked warily when the rough pad of his thumb traced the delicate line of her collarbone. He had the hands of a working man, the skin calloused and sun kissed. As a lady she should have been repulsed, but as a woman she found herself hopelessly, helplessly intrigued. Felix was the embodiment of everything she had been taught to avoid. But there was something tantalizingly forbidden about desiring what she shouldn't.

"Seeing if you feel as soft as I remember." His husky whisper sent ribbons of heat slithering down into her belly. Those warm golden eyes held her captive as his hand followed the natural curves of her body, fingers brushing over linen and lace before sinking into her hip and drawing her close.

She sucked in a breath when she felt his hard thigh against her own.

Closed her eyes when his head lowered...

"Who are you and what are you doing to my mother?"

Felicity jumped back as if she'd been scalded by boiling water when

the bedroom door suddenly swung open to reveal a suspicious looking Henry with his arms folded tightly across his chest and a curious Anne peering out from behind his back.

The children!

Her cheeks went pale even as guilt and shame heated the nape of her neck and burned the tips of her ears. How could she have forgotten about them, even for one single second? What would she have said if they'd caught her and Felix kissing? How would she have explained? They were too young to understand. Heavens, she was nearly five and twenty and even *she* didn't understand.

It is all his fault, she decided with a glare at Felix. He never should have come here, let alone tried to seduce her! What was he thinking? Better yet, what was *she* thinking? Yes, Felix was charming and yes, one glance at him and her knees trembled, but he was a man and if there was anything she knew with absolute certainty it was that men could not be trusted.

Oh, they were all charming at first. Especially the handsome ones. But once they had what they wanted or they saw something they wanted more off they went, heedless of the broken hearts they left in their wake. They did not care about the harm they caused or the lives they ruined. They thought only of themselves, and Felix was no different.

Why, with that devilish smirk and those golden eyes that had the uncanny ability to stare straight into a woman's soul he was by far the worst of the lot! And she had been one heartbeat away from kissing him.

Again.

Foolish woman, she chided herself. *Have you learned nothing?*

“Henry darling, this is Mr. Spencer.” She glanced at Felix out of the corner of her eye to gauge his reaction to her children. Ezra had always treated Henry and Anne with bafflingly cold indifference. Had it been up to him he would have left their raising entirely to the nanny which was something she’d never understood. Why have children if not to love them and hold them and kiss their sweet brows? “Mr. Spencer is a Runner, just like Aunt Scarlett’s husband. Isn’t that right, Mr. Spencer?”

“Mr. Spencer is a Runner?” Henry’s eyes widened as his suspicion quickly turned to excitement. Like most young boys his age he positively idolized the Bow Street Runners. Both Scarlett and Owen had invited her to bring the children by for a tour of headquarters, but not wanting to inadvertently run into Felix again, she had declined.

A great deal of good that did me, she thought silently.

“Aye, that I am,” Felix said with an easy grin. Much to Felicity’s surprise he crouched down to Henry’s level and spoke to him not as if he were an unimportant child, but an equal. “Except I’m much better at catching criminals than Captain Steel.”

“You catch *criminals*?”

“That I do. The worst of the worst. Murderers and thieves and – other sorts,” he said when Felicity frowned and shook her head.

“Yes, Mr. Spencer captures criminals,” she said. “In fact, he was just on his way to capture one now. Weren’t you, Mr. Spencer?” Her meaningful glance at the door could not have been clearer. But

instead of taking her thinly veiled hint that he had overstayed his welcome – not that he'd ever been welcome in the first place – Felix stuck his thumbs into the pockets of his trousers and rocked back on his heels as if he had all the time in the world.

“Actually,” he drawled with one of those insufferable grins that made her teeth clench and her heart flutter, “I’ve already caught all the criminals there are to catch for the day. I’ve nowhere to be except right where I am. Where are you three off to on this fine afternoon?”

Felicity had always thought of persistence as a virtue, but in Felix’s case it was a considerable annoyance. “That is none of your–”

“Pawk!” Anne stepped out from behind her brother and flashed Felix one of her sweetest smiles. “Howsies at the pawk.”

“She means we are going to see the horses at the park,” Henry translated.

“Ah.” Felix gave a serious nod. “My father used to take me to do the exact same thing when I was a boy.”

“How nice of him.” Felicity’s strained smile fell far short of her eyes. “Mr. Spencer, I would not want us to be a burden. You really should–” She was stopped short when Anne came dashing across the room and pulled at her skirts.

“Up, Mamma. Up!”

“As I was saying,” she continued, lifting Anne up and settling her on the edge of her hip, “You really should return to–”

“You come!” Twisting in her mother’s arms, Anne grinned adoringly at Felix. “You come to the pawk.”

“Oh no darling, Mr. Spencer is so busy he could not possibly–”

“I’d love to, lass.”

Between Felix and my children, Felicity thought crossly, *I am never going to finish another sentence as long as I live*. Her lips parted, ready to tell Felix once and for all that he really needed to be on his way, but one inadvertent glance at Henry and her mouth snapped shut.

For the first time since they’d returned to London her son looked genuinely happy. He and Anne had been through so much over the past six months. If a walk through Hyde Park with a Bow Street Runner put a smile on their faces then she supposed she could abide Felix’s company for a little while longer.

“Very well. It is settled. We will all go together.” Her children did not notice the subtle rigidity in her voice but Felix did, and she could tell by the gleam in his eye that her discomfort amused him.

She set Anne back down before she lifted her head and made a point to meet his gaze without flinching. If he thought to charm her into submission with a few disarming smiles he would quickly come to learn that despite her diminutive stature she was not a woman easily cowed.

She had been once. Not so very long ago all it had taken was one of Ezra’s long, measured stares to set her in her place. But after he’d taken everything from her there was to take – her home, her reputation, even her title – she’d sworn to herself that she would never again give any man the power to control her. And unlike her husband, when Felicity made a vow she kept it.

“Shall we?” she said, pointing at the door.

Felix opened it with a showy sweep of his arm. “After you my

lady,” he told Anne who giggled and toddled past him, her tiny hand firmly encased in Henry’s larger one. Felix glanced back over his shoulder, one side of his mouth curving in a half-smile. “Miss Atwood?”

“Mr. Spencer,” she replied formally as she sailed past him.

His quiet chuckle followed her out the door.

CHAPTER THREE

FELIX HAD ALWAYS LIKED HYDE PARK. It was a busy place, the bridle paths overflowing with a jumble of gleaming black carriages and women in plumed hats and men with trails of cigar smoke in their wake. It was also the one place in London where commoners could rub shoulders with nobility and aside from a few scandalized glances and the occasional disapproving ‘*tut tut*’ of an old dowager, no one said a word.

He’d been telling the truth when he said he used to come to the park as a young lad and watch the horses prance by. But his father had never taken him.

A drunkard with a mean right hook and the devil’s own temper, Cornelius Spencer had never been much of a father. Or a husband for that matter. Felix considered himself lucky to have escaped his childhood with only one broken arm and a scar above his right brow where, in a fit of rage, the old man had thrown an empty gin bottle at his head.

When Cornelius finally died of consumption no one had mourned him. Felix was the only one to attend the funeral and that was because he’d paid for it. It had rained the entire bloody time and after the first

shovelful of dirt had been dumped onto his father's wooden casket he'd walked away and he'd never gone back.

When his mother followed her husband to an early grave Felix had seen to it that she was buried in a small, quiet graveyard on the outskirts of the city. He couldn't save her from Cornelius in life, but he'd be damned if he forced her to remain beside him in death.

Now, aside from an older brother he hadn't seen in years, the Runners were the only family he had left. Despite being closer to thirty than he was to twenty, he'd never been inclined to marry. A mistress was demanding enough. He couldn't imagine a wife. All the complaining and the incessant whining...no bloody thank-you. At least when you were done with a mistress you could toss a fancy piece in her direction and send her on her way. But a wife was with you until death.

Or divorce, he thought silently as he looked ahead to where Felicity was walking hand in hand with her two young children.

She hadn't told him about the divorce herself, but he had eyes and ears, didn't he? As well as a keen sense of observation. He'd seen the way people looked at her. Even in the middle of the park they stopped and stared and whispered behind their fancy gloves and expensive silk fans.

They whispered about a scandalous affair with another man. They whispered that green-eyed, blond-haired Henry looked nothing like his father. And they whispered that Lord Ashburn was better off without a harlot for a wife.

It was nearly impossible for Felix to reconcile the woman they

described with the demure lady he had stolen a kiss from on a warm summer's day. One with porcelain skin and dark silky hair and the saddest eyes he'd ever seen. But if there was one thing he'd learned as a Runner it was that every rumor held a seed of truth. The seed may not have been easy to find but it was always there, buried away in the dark and the damp, feeding on secrets and shame.

Felix would find out the truth eventually.

He always did.

"Are we detaining you, Mr. Spencer?" Stopping abruptly, Felicity peered back at him over her shoulder, a tiny frown flirting with the delicate edges of her mouth. With a cheerful grin Felix extended his stride.

"Not at all. Just admiring the view." His gaze dipped pointedly to the slightly rounded bustle on Felicity's light green walking dress. She may have been a small woman, but her curves were there if one only knew where to look. And Felix *always* knew where to look.

Pink blotches appeared high on her cheeks when she noted the direction of his stare. Snatching up a handful of her skirt she whirled to face him. The children, distracted by a pair of ducks, wandered to the side of the path.

"*Mr. Spencer*," she hissed, violet eyes flashing.

"Aye?" he said with an innocent tilt of his head. He loved that it was so damn easy to get under her skin. Teasing her made him feel like a young lad again tugging on the red braids of Franny O'Connor. She'd been his first kiss, Franny had, and the memory was a dear one.

Since Franny he'd kissed his fair share of women...and done quite a

bit more than just kiss. He may not have had a title or a fancy estate in the country, but what he lacked in capital he more than made up for in roguish charm. Truth be told he'd never met a woman he couldn't have eating out of the palm of his hand within a matter of minutes...until Felicity. She was a puzzle, that one, comprised of intricate layers he was thoroughly enjoying peeling back.

On the outside she was shy and demure. A proper lady through and through. But beneath her timidly reserved façade was a woman with a spine of steel and the fierce heart of a lioness who would do anything to protect her cubs. Was it any wonder he'd been unable to get her out of his head since their first meeting? Even if Captain Steel hadn't asked him to check up on her and the little ankle biters he would have still shown up on her doorstep. Particularly since her doorstep was in such an unfavorable part of London.

A scowl darkened his countenance.

What the bollocks was she thinking, renting a flat in the East End? The place was ripe with pickpockets and thieves and ne'er-do-wells.

He would know.

He used to be one of them.

"*Mr. Spencer!*" This time Felicity punctuated her words with a hard stomp of her foot.

Felix blinked. "What the devil 'ave I done now?"

"You're still staring." More color flooded her cheeks. "At – at my *bosom*."

So he was. "And where else would I look?"

"You could look at the flowers."

“Never liked flowers.”

“What about the clouds?”

“If you’ve seen one cloud you’ve seen them all.”

“The trees are rather lovely. The cherry blossoms—”

“I despise the color pink.”

Her loud sigh of exasperation made the corners of his mouth twitch.

“You are insufferable!”

“Because I don’t like the color pink?”

“No. Because – because – oh, you know why!”

“As I’ve been nothing but cordial from the very first moment we met, I cannot say that I do. Care to enlighten me, love?” He grinned down at her. Who knew making a woman blush could be so delightfully arousing? Felicity’s cheeks were the color of an apple ripe for the plucking. Were they not surrounded on all sides he would have yanked her against his chest, buried his hands in her hair, and devoured her mouth in one satisfying bite. The mere thought of tasting all that sweetness mixed with a little bit of tart made his blood heat and the muscles in his abdomen clench.

Completely oblivious to his mounting desire, Felicity regarded him as one would a particularly bothersome gnat. “I would be more than happy to list every single one of your faults, but we haven’t all day,” she said sharply. Turning her back on him, she called out to her children. “Anne, Henry, come along! Leave those poor ducks alone. You haven’t any bread crumbs to feed them.”

“But they’re my fweinds,” Anne protested.

“I know darling, but they’ll be here next time. We will be sure to

bring – no, don't try to pet it!" Felicity sprang forward as Anne let out an impressively loud wail. Plopping down on her bottom, she tearfully held her hand up for her mother to inspect while Henry watched on with the long-suffering expression of a boy who had seen this scene play out many times before.

"My fweind bit me," Anne sniffled.

"Well you should not have tried to touch him." Felicity's tone was firm, but the kiss she placed on Anne's finger was gentle. "There. All better. Can you stand, please?"

Anne looked up at her mother in confusion. "But my fweind bit me."

Felix muffled a snort of laughter. He'd never particularly liked children, but he found these two to be surprisingly charming. With her dark curly hair, violet eyes, and angelic smile, little Anne was a miniature replica of her mother while Henry had Felicity's strength and courage.

His grin dimmed as he thought about what a cold-hearted bastard Lord Ashburn must have been to turn his own blood away. Even if the rumors of Felicity's infidelity were true – which he highly doubted – the viscount had an obligation as a father to see to it that his children were well cared for. Instead he had washed his hands of them through divorce and disownment, an act so callous and cruel it made Felix's blood boil.

Didn't Ashburn know what sort of monsters preyed on young, unwed mothers? Especially outside the gilded walls of Grosvenor Square. Or maybe he *did* know and that was precisely why he had

done it. Felix's lip curled in a sneer. There had never been any love lost between himself and the gentry and this only confirmed why they deserved his disgust.

Despite all their money and their titles and their big houses they were catty little badgers, never satisfied with what they had. Always wanting more. Wanting better. Wanting the best. And never afraid to step on the shoulders of those dearest to them to get it.

Without consciously thinking about what he was doing, he walked to the side of the path and crouched down beside Felicity. He felt her give the tiniest of jumps when their knees touched, but for once his focus wasn't on her.

"Look over there," he told Anne, pointing across the lane to where a lady dressed in a sharp green riding habit sat upon a finely-boned mare. "Do you know what color that horse is?"

Anne turned her head and squinted. "Bwown?"

"That's right, lass." He could feel Felicity watching him with all the intensity of a hawk, waiting to swoop in and rescue her daughter from his treacherous clutches at a moment's notice. Ignoring her, he gave Anne an encouraging grin. "Its body is brown. But do you see how its mane and tail are black?"

"Uh huh," the child said uncertainly.

"That makes it a bay."

She mulled this over for a moment. "A bay?"

"Indeed."

"What colow is that one?"

"A chestnut."

She pointed again.

“A gray.”

“A gway.” Any lingering concerns about her feathered ‘fweinds’ and injured finger faded away as she repeated the word softly to herself. Then she peered up at Felix with those big violet eyes and gave him the sweetest of smiles before she popped to her feet and went scampering off.

With a quick, searching glance at Felix, Felicity gathered her skirts and dashed quickly after her wayward daughter. “Anne! Anne, do not go out of sight. Henry please get your sister – no, don’t eat that!”

Felix sat back on his heels, an amused grin curling his mouth as he watched Felicity chase her children around the vine covered trunk of an old oak. When they came around the other side of it all three of them were laughing. Anne was giggling so hard there were tears in her eyes and even Henry was wearing a grin that stretched from one ear to the other. As he watched Felicity pick up her daughter and swing her around he felt a deep, unfamiliar pang inside of his chest. Like someone had taken a hammer and cracked his heart wide open.

Bloody hell.

That *hurt*.

Felix’s jaw clenched as he stood up. He had come to Hyde Park to ensure Felicity and her children weren’t set upon by muggers or pickpockets. And – if he were being completely honest – to steal another kiss if the opportunity presented itself.

One thing he *hadn’t* planned on?

Falling in love.

He never had before. Not fully. Oh, he'd come close a few times. Once with a French courtesan who'd had the most amazingly talented tongue and a year later with an opera singer whose flair for the dramatic had extended into the bedroom. But he had never been stupid enough to take the full plunge. Why would he? Love was for fools and poets. Not for thieves turned Bow Street Runners. Especially ones with a history as dark as his own.

Yet if his traitorous heart could be believed that was precisely what he was in danger of doing. And not just with Felicity, but with the whole lot of them. The cat *and* the kittens, such as it were. Which was so utterly ridiculous he couldn't help but laugh.

He was a scoundrel, a rake, and ne'er-do-well with a reputation that made men think twice before they crossed his path. He'd wooed countless women. Had any number of lovers. Claimed some of England's greatest beauties as his mistresses. Yet here he was, fawning over a woman who wanted nothing to do with him and two children that were not his.

"What is so amusing, Mr. Spencer?" Balancing Anne on her hip and keeping a restraining hand on Henry's shoulder, Felicity approached him with one ebony brow arched high.

Felix just shook his head. "Irony, Miss Atwood. Irony."

CHAPTER FOUR

FELICITY HADN'T THE FOGGIEST IDEA what Felix suddenly found so humorous, and she wasn't certain she wanted to know. Some things were best left to the imagination and the inner-workings of Felix's clever mind was surely one of them.

"The children and I are going to continue on our walk. They want to see the boats sailing on the Serpentine." She hesitated. "Would you care to accompany us?" After seeing the way Felix had been with Anne – so gentle and kind – she couldn't help but wonder if there was more to him than she'd first thought. She still did not trust him. How could she? He was a man. But the children seemed taken, and surely there was no harm in extending their time together a little bit more.

"I knew you would come around eventually. Women always do."

Felicity was sure they did, but if Felix thought she was one of his light-skirts who went all doe-eyed every time he smiled then he was destined for disappointment. "I have not 'come around' to anything, Mr. Spencer. Nor do I intend to." Absently wetting her thumb, she rubbed a spot of dirt off Anne's cheek before setting the toddler down. "My invitation was born of politeness, nothing more. If you choose to decline it would not bother me in the least."

“I’d have to be a fool to do that.” His voice lowered as one eyebrow raised. “Do I strike ye as a fool, Miss Atwood?”

Felix Spencer was many things. A thief. A Runner. A rogue. But a fool? No, he wasn’t that. Not that she was about to stroke his ego by telling him as much. The man’s head was already so inflated it was a wonder it did not detach from his body and float up into the clouds.

“Are you coming or not, Mr. Spencer?” she said with a sigh.

“I hope to, love.” His wolfish grin betrayed the double entendre behind his words and Felicity blushed from the roots of her hair to the curve of her collarbone. Had she never been married the sly innuendo would have most likely flown right over her head, but courtesy of Ezra’s monthly visits to her bedchamber she knew precisely what Felix was insinuating.

“Mr. *Spencer*! You are incorrigible.”

He tapped his chin. “I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said about me.”

“It was not intended as a compliment.”

“Well now you’ve hurt my feelings.”

Felicity barely managed to contain a snort. “I highly doubt that. Given how many insults you must receive on a daily basis, I can only assume you whisk them away as easily as water off a duck’s back.”

“Ye are right about that, love.” He flashed her a grin before extending his right arm in a fancy flourish that would have done a duke proud. “Shall we? I promise I won’t bite, Miss Atwood. Very hard,” he added under his breath when she lightly rested her gloved hand on his wrist.

She shot him a glance of warning as they began walking. The children scampered ahead, eager to get to the Serpentine, the largest man-made lake in all of London. Built at the request of Queen Caroline, it encompassed nearly forty-acres with a bridge that connected directly to Kensington Gardens. "Behave yourself, Mr. Spencer."

"Or what?" he challenged, lifting a brow.

"Or I shall report your behavior to Captain Steel." It was a baseless threat. She had no intention of bothering Owen with such an insignificant matter when he had things of far greater importance to deal with – the least of which being his fiery bride – but Felix did not need to know that.

"I never took ye for the tattlin' type, Miss Atwood. But if you're going to tell on me...I might as well do something worth telling." His eyes darkened, her only warning before he spun her towards him and covered her mouth with his.

The kiss was shockingly fast. No more than the span of a heartbeat. But lightning needed only a second to scorch the earth and when Felix released her Felicity staggered away from him feeling as though she'd just stepped out of a storm.

Ripples of electricity coursed through her body, all the way from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. If she had a small mirror inside her reticule she wouldn't have been surprised to find her bonnet askew and her hair standing on end.

Good heavens.

Her lips were tingling. Were lips supposed to tingle after a kiss?

They never had before. Not with Ezra and certainly not with Rodger Sherwood.

But you no longer think about that, she reminded herself as a cold shard of ice pierced through the heat and jolted her back to her senses. *Or him.*

She'd learned a long time ago it was far easier to ignore the past than to dwell on it. That was why she kept every memory of Lord Sherwood and that horrible morning tucked away in a deep, dusty corner where no one would think to look, least of all herself.

It certainly helped that Scarlett's first husband was dead. Killed by his wife's own maid in a dramatic twist that belonged on the pages of a Shakespearean play. As she was not a vengeful person by nature, Felicity found no happiness in Rodger's death. But she was glad she would no longer have to fear seeing the man who had taken something she'd not willingly given.

And who gave me something I will never willingly give up.

As it always did whenever her thoughts turned to Rodger, her gaze flicked to Henry. He was skipping down the path arm in arm with his sister, completely unaware of the dark circumstances surrounding his conception...and the whispers that still lingered when no one thought she was listening.

Somewhere along the way Henry had lost his cap and his blond hair waved in the breeze. He needed a trim, she noted. He always needed a trim. But even if she cut off every last curl she could not change the color of his eyes or the defiant angle of his chin. Those he'd inherited straight from his father.

Lord Rodger Sherwood.

Pressing a hand flat against her sternum, she forced herself to take a long, measured breath when her lungs began to burn. For three long years after the attack the mere thought of Rodger had sent her into a full-blown panic. She still remembered all too clearly what it felt like to drown in the middle of a room filled with oxygen. The awful, suffocating weight. The paralyzing fear. The burning that slowly turned to numbness. Every episode had been more unbearable than the last and made even worse because she'd had no one to turn to. Ezra had not understood and Scarlett...well, suffice it to say they had not been on speaking terms. Only out of sheer desperation had she finally learned to control her emotions and she would never allow herself to go down that dark path again.

Breathe, she commanded her lungs. *Just breathe. In and out. That's it.*

"What are ye thinking about?" Felix's hand on her waist made her jump six inches off the ground. She shied to the side, as skittish as a filly feeling the bit between its teeth for the very first time.

"N-nothing." In her haste to spit the lie out she tripped over her own tongue. Dragging in a mouthful of air, she fought to compose herself. "I was – I was not thinking about anything."

"You've awful sad eyes to be thinking about nothing, love." A frown replaced Felix's perpetual grin as he studied her, his tawny gaze so intent that she feared he was going to reach in and pluck her secrets right out of her head.

Nonsense, she thought. *A person can only know what you tell them.*

And she had no intention of telling Felix about Rodger. The only two people who knew were Ezra and Scarlett. She'd told Ezra as soon as she realized she was carrying a child that did not belong to him and Scarlett had learned the truth only recently, ending a seven-year-long feud between them. As far as she was concerned the past was buried. There was no point in dragging it back into the present. Especially now that Rodger was gone and both her husband and her dearest friend had moved on.

But you haven't, a tiny voice reminded her. *Not really. Not where it—*

“Oh do be quiet,” she muttered under her breath.

“What was that?”

Her brows snapped together. What was Felix still *doing* here? She wanted him to leave. Almost as much as she wanted him to stay. A choked laugh spilled from her lips as she shook her head, bemused by her own conflicting thoughts.

“I said you should not have done that, Mr. Spencer. Kissed me,” she elaborated when he merely canted his head to the side. “It isn’t proper to display affection in a public setting.” A furtive peek over her left shoulder revealed more than one curious onlooker staring in their direction. How many had witnessed the impromptu kiss? *Enough to stir up more gossip*, she thought with a bitter twist of her lips. Not that it truly mattered as her reputation couldn’t possibly find anyplace lower to sink. But she was tired of seeing her name in the gossip pages. Or, if not her name – the infamous Lady V technically never used names – then a descriptive moniker that allowed everyone to know exactly whom the Duchess of Scandal was writing about.

She scowled at Felix before she shook out her skirts and marched on, not wanting Henry and Anne to get more than a few yards ahead. Their legs may have been short but they were deceptively fast and easily distracted. The last thing she needed on top of everything else was to lose sight of them in the middle of a crowded park.

Felix caught up to her easily, his large steps dwarfing her smaller ones.

“Consider my invitation to accompany us rescinded,” she said without looking at him.

“Because of a little peck?” he protested.

“Go away, Mr. Spencer.”

“Ye were right, ye know.”

“I was? Of course I was.” She hesitated. “About what, precisely?”

“I shouldn’t have kissed ye in the park.”

“You are correct.” She pursed her lips together, glad she had finally been able to make him see reason. A person couldn’t go about giving out kisses all willy-nilly. It simply wasn’t done. “You should not have. I am glad you–”

“Best to wait until we’re alone.”

Her stride faltered. “P-pardon me?”

“I don’t want to rush our first time together. When I put my hands on your soft, smooth skin I want all the time in the world to touch ye.” His eyes glinted with roguish pleasure as his gaze skimmed down to her breasts before returning to her flushed face. “And taste ye,” he finished huskily.

Was it suddenly much hotter than it had been a few seconds ago?

Yanking her fan out of her reticule, Felicity waved it feverishly in front of her face as she quickened her pace. “That – that is a *preposterous* thing to say, Mr. Spencer!”

“No, Miss Atwood.” His voice dropped to a raspy growl that sent shivers of dark delight racing down her spine. “That’s a promise.”

HE’D GOTTEN UNDER HER skin again, Felix thought with a self-satisfied smirk when Felicity huffed out a breath and hurried away from him as fast as her dainty little feet could carry her. Slowing his stride, he allowed her to put some distance between them, although he was careful not to let her out of his sight.

It was only a matter of time before he found a way under her skirts. Maybe then he’d get all these buggering thoughts of *love* out of his head.

Or maybe not.

A man could do a sight worse than Miss Felicity Atwood. If he were the marrying type – which he wasn’t – she was precisely the sort of wife he’d pick. Soft, kind, and considerate, with just enough steel in her spine to intrigue him. And hadn’t he always pursued what intrigued him?

Whether it was a pretty bauble or a beautiful woman, Felix was not a man to deny himself the pleasure of taking what he wanted. When he’d become a Runner, the Captain had made him vow that his days of robbing the wealthy of their most prized possessions were behind him...but he’d never mentioned anything about stealing hearts.

Felicity desired him. She may not have said as much out loud – in

fact, she'd said the exact opposite – but he knew desire when he tasted it. He also knew pain, and the raw flash of it in her expressive violet eyes had filled him with the primal urge to protect and defend. Against what or whom he wasn't yet certain, but he'd be damned before he allowed anything to happen to the delicate, dark-haired beauty who, against all odds, had somehow found a way under *his* skin.

He scratched his neck, short nails digging into tanned flesh as he shook his head in silent bemusement. It wasn't supposed to be like this. He was the bloody thief. Not Felicity. But bugger him sideways if she wasn't the one who was threatening to steal *his* heart.

His eyes narrowed as he watched her bonnet bob and weave its way through the congested park. London was not the place for a well-bred lady to be on her own. A quiet country village would have suited her perfectly, for even the tree-lined streets of Grosvenor Square were not safe once the sun went down.

And the East End was no Grosvenor Square.

She needed protection, whether she wanted it or not. Luckily for her, he knew just the man up to the task...

CHAPTER FIVE

NOT WANTING TO LET FELICITY get too far ahead, Felix extended his stride and caught up with her just as she and the kittens reached the far edge of the Serpentine.

The glittering blue lake was crowded today, filled with a hodge-podge of small sailboats, rowboats, and pond yachts being pulled along on strings. No one swam in the water – despite the hint of spring in the air the ice had only thawed a few weeks ago – but the shoreline was filled with an assortment of men, women, and children, a few of which had taken off their shoes, rolled up their stockings, and were tentatively dipping their toes in the water.

“Going to go for a swim, Miss Atwood”

Holding fast to her children’s hands, Felicity turned all three of them around to face him.

“Mr. Spencer,” she sighed, and the exasperation in her voice had him swallowing back a grin. “Here I thought we had lost you. Thank *heavens* you are still with us. I simply do not know what we would have done if you had gone away and never, ever come back.”

Her sarcasm did not discourage him in the slightest. Felix had always liked a good challenge, and he was enjoying this one

immensely. For all her attempts at dissuasion Felicity might as well have been waving a red flag in front of a bull.

“You’ll have to try harder than that to lose the likes of me, love.”

“More’s the pity,” she murmured under her breath.

Felix just grinned.

“Have you ever raced a pond yacht, Mr. Spencer?” Unaware of the rising tension between the two adults, Henry gazed longingly over his shoulder to where half a dozen boys were running alongside miniature replicas of sailing vessels complete with masts and rigging. The small yachts cut effortlessly through the water, their white sails billowing in the breeze as they raced towards the finish line: a tree branch that extended over the lake, its budding green leaves just touching the water.

“Have I,” Felix scoffed. “Lad, you’re looking at the Ponding Champion of 1787.” He didn’t see any reason to mention that the common man’s version of Ponding and the aristocrat’s version of Ponding were two entirely different things. Far as he was concerned a boat was a boat. Who cared if it was made out of old wood and newspaper or glossy mahogany and hemp? Just as long as it floated.

“*You* were the Ponding Champion of 1787,” Felicity said dubiously.

“Aye, that I was. Even have a trophy to prove it.” The fib floated off his tongue with the effortless grace of someone who was adept at telling half-truths. The fact of the matter was that he *did* have a trophy. Of sorts. No need to reveal it was made of battered tin and frayed ribbon and had been given to him by his own mother. Not when Henry was looking at him as if he’d hung the sun in the sky with

one hand and the moon with the other.

“Really?” The boy’s eyes widened to the size of two copper pennies. “I have a Cricket Sloop. Fastest one you’ve ever seen!” His face abruptly dropped, bottom lip puckering out as his fair brows pulled together. “I mean I *used* to have one,” he muttered, peering up at his mother who gently squeezed his shoulder.

“We’ll get you another, darling. And we shall come here every day to race it.” Even though Felicity smiled, Felix could see evidence of the strain she was trying to hide in the thin lines stretching out from the corners of her eyes. He couldn’t say he was surprised. Given the complexity and cost of materials, Pondering was a very expensive hobby. Far too expensive for the likes of a single mother with two hungry mouths to feed.

Once again he cursed Ashburn for being a heartless bastard. It was one thing for the viscount to leave his wife, but what the devil had he gained by disowning his children? They’d done nothing wrong. The least he could have done was given Henry his damned toy boat before he tossed the boy aside like a bucket of scraps.

“Come to think of it,” he said, rubbing his chin, “I might still have my sloop. She’s a bit smaller than your Cricket, but give her the open water and a fair breeze and there’s nothing that can catch her. You wouldn’t be interested in testing her out, would you lad? We’d probably have to polish her up, but with some spit and shine—”

“Yes!” Henry waved his arms up and down with all the enthusiasm of a young bird trying to take flight. “Yes, yes, yes!”

Felix chuckled. “Best ask your mother, lad.”

“Mum, can I? Can I, Mum? Please?”

“Mr. Spencer,” Felicity ground out between her teeth, “a word. Henry, watch your sister. Closely,” she warned with a wag of her finger before she wrapped her hand around Felix’s wrist and pulled him off the path towards a long row of summer lilacs that were just beginning to bloom.

“Dragging me off so ye can have your way with me?” he asked hopefully.

“Hardly.” When they were out of earshot of the children she released his arm and whirled to face him. Delicate pink buds surrounded her head; a perfect foil to the fire flashing in her eyes. “I wanted to warn you against making promises you have no intention of keeping. It is one thing to play games with me, Mr. Spencer, but you are not to do the same with Henry and Anne. They are not pawns to be used at will. They are children. Innocent children who have already been through enough. Do I make myself clear?”

Anger clashed against anger as the tight leash Felix kept on his temper loosened ever-so-slightly. Having been raised by a man whose moods were as dangerous and unpredictable as the tides, he’d vowed to himself at a young age that he would never become his father. No matter the provocation he would not hurt those closest to him. But eyes the color of burnished wheat were not the only thing Cornelius Spencer had given his son and at Felicity’s words Felix felt the all-too familiar burn and bite of his temper as it swelled dangerously close to the surface.

Had she accused him of lying he wouldn’t have batted an eye. Had

she accused him of any number of sins he would have happily admitted his guilt and then committed them all over again. He wasn't a saintly man, nor would he ever pretend to be one. But there were some things even he wouldn't do, and Felicity's implication that he was using her children as pawns was an insult to what little honor he *did* possess.

"Is that what ye think I've been doing?" he growled. "Playing games with ye?"

"That is exactly what I think you are doing."

"Well ye couldn't be more wrong. I might not be a good man, but I'm a sure sight better than that."

Felicity bit her lip, gaze dropping down to her long, shapely fingers encased in soft leather gloves. Her fingers curled into themselves, the tips pressing against the curve of her palms before she expelled a deep breath and flattened her hands along the sides of her skirt. "Then what *are* you after, Mr. Spencer?" Those violet eyes peeked up at him beneath a sweep of ebony lashes. "What do you want?"

"You." If they were alone he would have pinned her against the sweet smelling lilacs and kissed her breathless. Instead he restrained himself to a scorching stare that left no doubt as to the wicked thoughts dancing inside his head. "I'm after you, love, and I mean to have ye. But I won't be using the little ankle-biters to do it. When ye come to me – and ye *will* come to me – it'll be because ye can't spend another living moment outside my arms."

Her eyes narrowed. "You don't really have a pond yacht, do you?"

"Never did," he said cheerfully. "At least not the sort ye would

recognize. But I'll get one, and I'll see to it Henry beats all those young pups so badly they whimper home with their tail between their legs."

"But – but why?" she asked in bewilderment. "You've only just met him today. He doesn't mean anything to you. *We* don't mean anything to you."

Felix could have told her it was because he saw a bit of himself in the boy. He could have mentioned his own childhood and the pain he'd suffered at the hands of his father. He could have said she filled something inside of him that he hadn't even known was empty. But he wasn't a man in the habit of laying his soul bare, and so he just said, "Because I wanted to."

A leaf caught in her hair when he crowded her back against the sweet-smelling lilacs. Her gaze darted to the side. "Mr. Spencer, people are—"

"Hang 'em." He caught her wrist, his hand skimming up her arm until he felt the frantic beat of her pulse. She might have been able to hide what she was feeling behind an ivory wall of quiet stoicism, but the rapid pounding of her heart was not so easily disguised. "Who cares what they think? Let the prissy bounders stare all they want."

She looked at him as if he'd suddenly sprouted a second head before she snatched her arm away. "*I* do, Mr. Spencer. *I* care. Which is why I cannot have you doing – well, whatever it is you are doing!"

"I'm protecting ye."

Her eyes narrowed. "I do not need protection from you or any other man, thank you very much."

Felix knew what pride looked like, and Felicity was so filled with it

she was close to bursting. Having lost nearly everything but the dress on her back he supposed her dignity was the one thing she had left. And he wasn't about to take it away from her.

"Courtin' ye, then."

"Court-*courting* me?" An incredulous laugh spilled from her lips.

"Oh Mr. Spencer! You cannot be serious."

Felix scowled at her reaction. And then he scowled at his own scowl. *Buggerin' hell in a whore's handbasket*, he cursed silently as realization dawned. Devil take him, he really *was* being serious. And if that wasn't a swift kick in the arse he didn't know what was.

"What if I am?" he said.

Felicity's laughter stopped abruptly. "About – about courting me?"

"Aye."

"You cannot be," she said, looking flabbergasted at the very idea. "Stealing kisses, showing up unannounced, and following me around Hyde Park after I distinctly asked you to leave does not a courtship make."

"Then what does?" he demanded.

She shook her head. "I – I don't know."

"If ye know what a courtship isn't, then ye have to know what it is."

"I have not been courted in a very long time. I do not remember."

"Ashburn courted ye." It wasn't a question, but rather a statement. One that immediately caused Felicity's gaze to shutter.

"Yes," she said in a clipped tone that made it clear the subject of her husband was not one she cared to discuss. "He did. I really must get back to the children. I think it best if you allow me to go now, Mr.

Spencer. *Without* following.”

This time when she tried to squeeze between his hard chest and the lilac bush he let her pass.

But he had no intention of letting her go.

CHAPTER SIX

SCARLETT CAME TO CALL on Felicity the next morning. She entered with all the force of a small, blonde-haired whirlwind and did not hesitate to make her opinion on Felicity's new living quarters immediately known.

"You cannot stay in this hovel," she said bluntly. "I will not allow it."

In the midst of braiding Anne's hair, Felicity glanced up at her friend and managed a tight-lipped smile. Growing up on neighboring estates, the two women had been the closest of confidants. Until the morning Scarlett returned early from her morning ride and caught Felicity descending her staircase...with her husband half-dressed at the top of it.

Felicity still did not know why she hadn't told Scarlett the truth right there and then. That she'd come to return a bracelet she'd borrowed the evening before and Rodger had – well, he had done what Rodger always did. Taken advantage of those weaker than himself in the most despicable way possible.

As she'd stood frozen on the middle of the stairs and watched Scarlett's gaze dart between her closest friend and her husband,

Felicity had been unable to find her voice. By the time she did it was too late. Scarlett's love had turned to hate and it was easier – far, far easier – to let her think the worst than to admit what had *really* happened. Because even though Rodger had taken her against her will, she had not said no. She had not told him to stop. She had not done anything except lay beneath him with her eyes squeezed shut praying for it to end. And didn't that make some of the fault her own? Didn't that mean she *deserved* to have Scarlett look at her with absolute contempt and revulsion? Eight years later and she still did not know what the right answer was. It certainly hadn't been a bitter feud with no end in sight. Which was why, after Rodger's unexpected death, she'd told Scarlett the truth.

Their broken friendship was not back to where it had been. Felicity doubted it ever would be. But it was growing stronger every day. Strong enough for Scarlett to give her unvarnished opinion...and for Felicity to refute it.

"It may not be much to look at right now, but after it's cleaned up a bit I think it will be quite cheerful. Try not to wiggle, darling" she told Anne as her daughter began to kick her legs, a sure sign her patience was beginning to dwindle. "I am almost finished."

"Cleaned up a *bit*?" Scarlett dragged her fingertip along the windowsill and held it up for inspection. "My glove is black."

"All right," Felicity admitted, "perhaps it will take more than a bit. But the roof doesn't leak and the floorboards are sturdy and there's a fireplace."

Scarlett looked positively horrified. "You cannot mean to stay here

until *winter*.”

“And where else would you have us go?” Fishing in her pocket for a cheerful blue hair ribbon, she neatly tied off Anne’s soft brown curls with a large bow and patted her shoulder. “All done, darling. Why don’t you see what your brother is building?” She’d sent Henry into the bedroom over an hour ago and hadn’t heard a peep since. He enjoyed building things almost as much as Anne enjoyed knocking them down. They were a pair, the two of them. Sometimes she wondered how she was going to do it. How she was going to raise them while maintaining her own sanity. How she was going to be both a mother *and* a father. Then Henry would smile at her, or Anne would laugh, and all of her worries and her doubts and her fears faded away.

“They’re getting awfully big, aren’t they?” Scarlett remarked as Anne bounced away.

Felicity blew a tendril of hair out of her eyes and stretched her arms above her head. Transitioning from a feather-stuffed mattress to a straw pallet was much more difficult than she’d anticipated. The children hadn’t seemed to mind, but her muscles had certainly noticed the difference. Particularly after she’d tossed and turned more than half the night, unable to close her eyes without thinking about Felix.

“Every day I wake up and they seem to have grown two inches overnight.” Her mother had once told her that while the days were often long with children, the years were short. To both her joy and regret, truer words had never been spoken. “I am afraid Henry will soon be taller than I am.”

“In which case he’ll no longer fit through the door. Filly, what are you *doing* here? You know you have a room ready and waiting. Our new house is more than large enough.”

“For me, perhaps, but for two loud, boisterous children?” She shook her head. “You and Owen deserve some time to yourselves. I wouldn’t want to be a burden.”

“Do not be ridiculous,” Scarlett scoffed. “You would not be a burden at all. Especially not after everything I–” She managed to stop herself short, but the words she hadn’t spoken still hung in the air between them nevertheless.

“You do not owe me anything,” Felicity said firmly. It was a conversation they’d had before and one she had no intention of having again. As far as she was concerned they were starting anew and she did not want the foundation of their friendship to be built on doubt and debt.

“But I do.” Scarlett worried her bottom lip between her teeth as shame and guilt flashed across her heart-shaped countenance in equal measure. “All that has happened to you is my fault.”

Now it was Felicity’s turn to scoff. “How absurd. I do not blame you for any of it.” The floorboards creaked beneath her feet as she crossed the small room and clasped her friend’s hands in her own. “Let the past be the past. I have.”

“Only because you are a far better person than me.”

“I will not argue about that.”

The two women grinned at each other and for a moment – one short, blissful moment – it was as it had been before everything went

horribly wrong.

Before Scarlett spurned her childhood love for a man who never loved her.

Before Rodger took something that was never his to take.

Before Ezra left her for his mistress.

And where was I? Felicity couldn't help but wonder. Where was I when all of this was happening? Standing idly by. Being a perfect friend, a perfect lady, a perfect wife. Well, no longer.

Releasing Scarlett's hands, she went to the window and peered out through the dirty glass, mindful not to touch the ledge. In Grosvenor Square her view had been comprised of cherry blossoms and wrought iron fences and meticulously tended gardens. Now, if she squinted and tilted her head at just the right angle, she could catch a glimpse of a tiny patch of daffodils sprouting up amidst the drab and the dreary. "If you truly want to help me, then you will ask Owen to tell Mr. Spencer to leave me alone."

"Who?"

"Mr. Spencer." She turned her back on the daffodils. "Mr. Felix Spencer. He's a Runner. The one who stole your jewelry and kissed me," she said in exasperation when Scarlett continued to look mystified.

"Oh *that* Mr. Spencer. You know come to think of it, he never did return my emerald hair comb."

Somehow Felicity was not surprised. "He came here yesterday."

"He came *here*?" Scarlett's gray eyes widened. "Whatever for?"

To kiss me again.

“He wouldn’t say, other than some nonsense about protecting me.” Her brow creased with suspicion as a sudden thought occurred. “You and Owen did not send him, did you? Because I was very clear that I do not need looking after.”

“Of course not,” Scarlett said, looking vaguely insulted that Felicity would even dare suggest such a thing. “You know me. I never do anything I’m told not to.”

It was *because* Felicity knew her friend so well that she merely lifted a brow and waited.

Scarlett sighed.

“Very well, I *may* have mentioned that it would be a good idea for Owen to send one of his men to look in on you and make sure you were not murdered in your sleep. Had I known he was sending Mr. Spencer I would have asked him to drop off my hair comb first.”

“Please see to it that your husband does not send him again.”

“He would not have to send *anyone* if you just moved in with us. It would not have to be forever,” she said hurriedly when Felicity frowned. “A few months. Half a year at the most. Just until you decide what you’re going to do. Come to think of it, what *are* you going to do?”

It was a question Felicity had been asking herself every single day since Ezra showed her the door. There was no clear answer. At least none that she could see.

She couldn’t remarry again. Even if a man of means would have her – which was very doubtful – she wasn’t ready. She would make an excellent governess, but then what would she do with Henry and

Anne? A governess was supposed to raise someone else's children. Not bring her own along. The only thing she knew for certain was the money she'd managed to set aside by selling her jewelry was not going to last forever. It *would* run out and when it did she needed to have a plan in place.

"I do not know," she said honestly. "But I am confident that I will come up with something."

"Felicity—"

"No." She held up her hand. "I will not endanger my children. If it comes down to it, I will gladly accept your offer. But I have to try to make a go of it on my own. For once I – I need to do something for myself. I never have before. I know you, of all people, can understand that."

The ghost of a smile touched Scarlett's lips. "We thought it was going to be so easy, didn't we? Marry a handsome lord, move into a grand mansion, have a few well-behaved children. The dream of any young debutante."

"We did." Felicity hesitated. "But if it hadn't been difficult you never would have ended up with Owen."

"You raise a very good point." Not so very long ago Scarlett would have bristled at the mere mention of Owen's name. Now her entire face glowed with happiness. "And I *do* understand why you are so damn insistent on doing this on your own. I do not agree, but I do understand." Her eyes lit with an impish light. "Who knows? Perhaps it will lead to your own knight in shining armor."

Felicity huffed out a breath. "That is precisely what I do *not* need."

But if that was completely true...why did she suddenly think of Felix?

“ANOTHER PINT FOR me and my friends. Thank ye kindly, love.” Felix winked at the pretty barmaid as she handed him three metal tankards. Ale splashed over the sides and ran down across his knuckles in frothy ribbons of white while he worked his way back to the table he was sharing with two fellow Runners. Not so long ago the Captain would have occupied the fourth chair, but since he'd tied the knot his visits to The Pony had become far and infrequent.

It baffled Felix that a man would prefer the company of a woman to that of his mates and a cold mug of ale. Then again, he supposed it depended entirely on the woman. There was no denying Owen's new wife was a fine piece, although he could think of one who was even finer. A delicate brunette with tip-tilted violet eyes, a rosebud mouth that practically begged to be kissed, and the smoothest ivory skin he'd ever had the pleasure of touching.

Had Felicity asked he would have gladly exchanged a night of drinking for a night spent wrapped in her silky embrace. Hell, he would have traded ten pints just for the chance to fall asleep beside her.

If that wasn't true love he didn't know what was.

“Here ye are gents. As promised.” He slid two of the tankards across the circular table and kept the third for himself.

“Damn well took you long enough.” To look at Lord Grant Hargrave slouched comfortably in his chair with his arm around a buxom

blonde, one would never guess he'd grown up in the lap of luxury as the third son of a duke.

A tall, lean man with piercing green eyes, black hair, and sharp, aristocratic features, he'd been bred for the ballroom but had made a home for himself on Bow Street instead. He was second-in-command and would have been the captain if he hadn't foisted the position off on Owen. While most men would have clambered at the chance to be in charge (particularly if they'd had the great misfortune of being born third in line to a dukedom), Grant had no interest in leading. It was one of the few things he and Felix had in common.

"It's a bleedin' madhouse in here." Felix braced an arm against the back of his chair and glanced over his shoulder. Stuffed to the gills and noisy to the point of deafening, The Pony was easily the busiest he'd ever seen it. Every stool at the bar was taken and every table was full. In one corner five drunks bellowed a bawdy sailor's tune while a dozen half-dressed bit o'muslins worked the room with sultry eyes and sashaying hips.

"The match at Darby McCall's just ended," said Grant.

Ah, that explained it then. Boxing had always boasted a moderate following, but recently it had undergone a resurgence and, aside from horse racing, was currently the most popular and well-attended sport in all of London.

"Who won?" Felix couldn't recall the last time he had attended a match, but he knew the main players, including the two that had been squaring off tonight at Darby McCall's, a renowned gentleman's club just outside the theatre district. All of the fights took place below

ground in a large root cellar and were open for anyone to watch – just as long as they met the minimum bet. Even women were encouraged to attend, something which the other clubs frowned upon, but McCall's ran a tight ship and thus far none of the violence had ever spilled outside of the ring.

“Belcher.” Ronan Hawke – Bow Street's surliest (and largest) runner – grunted the boxer's name from his seat in the corner. Built like a bull with a square head set on a thick neck, broad shoulders, and a body that struggled to fit through most doors, Hawke was a bruiser from top to bottom. He was also a man of few – if any – words and kept mostly to himself, although he did seem to enjoy coming out for a pint now and again. Not that you'd ever know it by looking at his ugly mug.

“It speaks,” Felix said with a grin.

“Sod off,” Hawke muttered into his tankard.

“Hawke's right.” Looking amused, Grant tipped his drink towards the behemoth. “Belcher took it in the third round. Complete knockout. Hayworth never saw it coming.”

“How much did ye lose?” Felix wanted to know.

Grant's eyes narrowed. “What makes you assume I bet against Belcher?”

“Because ye never pick the winner.”

“I could have this time.”

“But ye didn't,” Felix said confidently.

Hawke nodded in silent agreement. It was well known that Grant couldn't win a bet to save his life. No matter how high the odds

were stacked in his favor he always lost. Which was why if Felix ever cared to place a wager he always asked Grant who he'd pick and then chose the exact opposite.

Worked like a charm every time.

"No." Grant shook his head in self-disgust. "I didn't. Cost me fifty pounds. Only would have lost half that if Hayworth had stayed on his feet but the bastard went down like a pile of bricks."

Felix coughed into his tankard. "Fifty soddin' pounds! Jesus. If ye wanted to toss your money away ye could have just given it to me."

"Wasn't Lady Irvine's necklace worth three times that?"

"Aye, but a tight-assed bounder made me give it back."

The two men exchanged unblinking stares that danced on the edge of animosity. They may have both been Runners, but they would never be friends. While they managed to maintain an air of civility (most of the time), Felix knew that if Grant had his way he'd be tossed into Newgate faster than he could say 'Bow Street'.

"I don't like boxing." The blonde perched on Grant's knee gave a delicate shudder that threatened to spill her voluptuous breasts right over the edge of her flimsy bodice. "Too much blood for my taste."

"That's what makes it's interesting, sweetheart." Grant stroked her arm, an absent gesture that Felix had seen him duplicate a hundred times over. As far as he could tell women were Grant's one and only vice. An unapologetic rake, his trail of broken hearts stretched all the way to Surrey and back. Every night he had a different woman on his arm. Or in this case, on his lap. "That's what men pay to see."

Her lips pursed in an exaggerated pout. "Well I think it's vile."

“Do you know what else is vile?” Grant asked with a roguish grin. When she shook her head he pulled her back against his chest and whispered something in her ear that caused her to gasp and slap at the hand sneaking its way up her skirt.

“You are *so* very naughty,” she cooed.

“I believe that is my cue to leave. Gentlemen,” Grant said, his clipped nod towards Felix noticeably shorter than the one he gave Hawke. The blonde squealed when he stood up and tossed her over his shoulder. Squealed again when he gave her a hard slap on the arse before heading out the door.

“Bloody nob,” Felix muttered, tilting his tankard back.

Hawke just grunted.

IT WAS WELL PAST two in the morning by the time Felix stumbled out of The Pony. He hadn’t intended to stay out so late, especially since he was expected at headquarters bright and early in the morning, but Hawke had been surprisingly conversational. In the span of three hours the behemoth had uttered five complete sentences; a new record.

Whistling a merry tune under his breath, Felix walked in more or less of a straight line as he cut through the middle of Fountain Hill, a shabby collection of pubs and shops. With the exception of a few lady loves out looking for one last tup of the night, the cobblestoned streets were empty and the lamps were dimmed, casting everything in a layer of murky shadow and fog.

It was even quieter in the East End. Those with any brains in their

head had long ago locked their doors and closed their shutters. Even the whores were in hiding. Felix ventured forth undeterred by the silence, or the ominous warning it carried with it. Other men would have thought twice before going within spitting distance of London's most nefarious rookery once the sun went down, particularly with any coins jangling in their pockets, but Felix was not like other men.

He'd been raised on these streets. The twisted alleyways had been his parlor. The rows of tenements his bedchamber. The abandoned warehouses with their crumbling walls and broken windows his ballroom. He may not have lived in the East End any longer, but there was comfort in visiting the familiar. Confidence in knowing that even half sotted he could take down any young pup foolish enough to go sniffing after what was his. And what he intended to claim as his.

His pace increased as he neared Felicity's flat. It was tucked away on a corner, shielded from the worst of the rot and decay. All in all it wasn't a terrible place, especially considering what surrounded it. Certainly it was a far cry better than where he'd grown up. There were even flowers blooming in the cracks in the cobblestone.

The ground around the yellow daffodils was damp, as if they'd been recently watered. Felicity's doing, he wagered, for who else would have the presence of mind to nurture what shouldn't have even been growing?

He slipped through the darkness with the grace of someone born into it. Tested the door to ensure it was locked. Pulled at the window ledge to make certain it was secure. Doors and windows were flimsy barriers that would do little to prevent a thief from entering, but he

imagined the act of bolting them shut gave Felicity peace of mind. Just as he was given peace of mind by leaving his mark.

It was a small thing. Nearly inconspicuous. Felicity wouldn't see it, but then it wasn't for her. It was for the serpents that lived in the shadows. The rats that thrived in the squalor. One glance and they would know this flat and everyone in it was under his protection. Just as they would know the fate that awaited them if they dared touch that which belonged to Felix Spencer.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FELICITY WOKE THE NEXT morning none the wiser as to who had been lurking outside her window during the night. A faint smile touched her lips when she glanced down and saw Henry and Anne nestled on either side of her, Anne with her thumb in her mouth and Henry with his head buried beneath the covers so only a pale tuft of hair was visible.

There were not many good things that had come out of her separation from Ezra, but this was one of them. He had never allowed the children into her bed. It had been one of the few things they'd actually argued about. Now she could do as she pleased and it pleased her to have the children close.

Careful not to rouse them – although she suspected nothing short of a trumpet would wake Henry – she slid off the thin mattress and padded barefoot into the other room, leaving the door open a crack. Then she stood indecisively in the middle of the kitchen/parlor/dining room, bottom lip tucked between her teeth as she studied the dormant fireplace.

On their way back from Hyde Park the day before she'd stopped and purchased a few necessities. Eggs, bread, and the like. But having

never actually started a fire of her own she hadn't any idea how she was going to cook breakfast, let alone serve it as there wasn't a single piece of chinaware to be had. Something she probably should have considered when she was buying the food.

Blast it all. Could *nothing* be easy?

Once again tears threatened and once again she pushed them back. She wouldn't cry. She *wouldn't*. She'd faced worse than this, hadn't she? Overcome more than this. Why, compared to the likes of Rodger Sherwood lighting a fire was like a teeny tiny little rut in a vast, bump riddled road. How hard could it be?

But twenty minutes later Felicity's face and hands were streaked with soot...and the eggs were no closer to being cooked than they had been when she'd started.

In a rare fit of temper she threw the useless tinderbox across the room. The circular metal tin bounced off the wall and broke open, spilling out the tufts of gray goose feathers that had refused to catch fire.

She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, forcing herself to recite a poem before she went about the task of gathering up the useless feathers. It was something an old governess had taught her to do; a tried and true trick to recover lost patience.

"For did those eyes as planets roll," she murmured under her breath as she knelt onto her hands and knees and peered under a built-in shelf. *"Thy sister-lights would scarce appear – there you are. Got you."* Triumphant grasping the last feather, she sat back on her heels and dusted off her hands. The sudden creak of a floorboard had her

stiffening.

“Easy love,” came Felix’s voice from directly behind her. “I don’t want to startle ye.”

It was too late for that. On a muffled shriek Felicity jumped to her feet and whirled around. “How did you get in here? Never mind,” she snapped. “How easily I forget that you are a thief. Breaking into places is your forte!”

His grin was unrepentant. “A *reformed* thief, love. Reformed being the operative word.”

The feather Felicity had gone to so much trouble to pick up fluttered lazily to the ground as she placed her hands on her hips. “What are you doing here, Mr. Spencer?”

“I’ve brought ye breakfast.” He glanced down at his right hand and for the first time Felicity noticed he was carrying a basket filled with all sorts of delicious looking pastries, from blueberry scones to buttery saffron buns.

“Why would you do such a thing?” she asked even as her mouth watered.

He looked at her oddly, as if the answer should have been obvious. “I’m courting ye, Miss Atwood.”

This nonsense again? She thought she’d dispelled any foolish notions of courtship when he’d had her pinned against the lilac bushes. Perhaps she merely needed to be a bit more blunt. “I am not going to be your mistress, Mr. Spencer.”

He rubbed under his chin. “I don’t recall askin’ ye to be my mistress.”

“Because you already have one, no doubt.”

“Would it bother ye if I did?”

Yes.

“No.” She lifted her hands off her hips and crossed them in front of her chest. “Absolutely not. You are nothing more than a swindler, Mr. Spencer, and your mistress is welcome to you.”

Although she did rather hope he left the basket.

“Swindler now, is it?” An unruly lock tumbled across his brow when his head canted to the side. “And what exactly is it that I’ve swindled from ye?”

Common sense, she nearly blurted aloud. *You’ve taken all of my common sense.*

How dashinglly handsome he looked this morning with his hair lightly tousled and the top two buttons on his linen shirt undone, revealing a swarthy V of tanned flesh. He should have been wearing a cravat. No respectable man left the house without one. But then hadn’t she learned firsthand that Felix was anything but respectable?

She had thought – she had hoped – they’d seen the last of each other yesterday afternoon. She should have known better. Like a dog with a bone, Felix was not the sort to give up on what interested him. And for reasons that defied explanation *she* seemed be what currently interested him.

“It is what you *will* swindle that concerns me, Mr. Spencer. I know your sort.”

“Do ye now?” he drawled.

“Yes,” she said decisively. “I was warned to avoid men like you

before my first season ever began.”

One brow lifted. “Men like me?”

“Blackguards. Rakes. Scoundrels. The name varies, but the intent does not. You use women as playthings and discard them the second your interest wanes.”

“That’s true enough,” he agreed, once again catching her off guard with his candor. Felicity was accustomed to men who hid their dark intentions behind a crocodile’s smile, as Rodger had done. Not ones who admitted their faults as if they were things to be *proud* of.

“Well then – then you know why I cannot trust you.”

“Aye, I suppose ye would see it that way,” he said thoughtfully. “But I already told ye I’m not after using ye. Didn’t I say this was not a game? The women I’ve been with before...” He cupped the back of his neck. Squeezed the corded muscles tight. “They were different.”

“Because you wanted to have an illicit affair with them and you want to court me?” she asked, her voice sugary sweet and all the more dangerous for it. Felicity was not a woman who threw vases or screamed or left the room in a dramatic huff when she was angry or wanted to make her point known. Instead she used her words like daggers, slicing with the precision of a surgeon.

“Yes.” He scowled. “No. I – bloody ‘ell, ye are twisting my words. I *do* want to court ye. I *am* courtin’ ye.”

It was Felicity’s turn to arch a brow. “I may not remember the exact specifics of what a courtship entails, but I know it does *not* involve entering the lady’s place of residence without her permission.”

“I brought ye pastries.”

“Blueberry scones do not negate the fact that you picked the lock on my door.”

“And how the devil else was I supposed to get in?” he demanded.

“You could have knocked.”

“Ye would have told me to go away.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “and then this conversation would have never needed to take place.”

“Which is why I let myself in.” He frowned at her. “I might ‘ave never courted a fine lady such as yourself before, but I think you’re supposed to be more grateful.”

Of all the preposterous—

“Have I told you how absolutely incorrigible you are?” she snapped.

“Only once,” he said easily.

“Which should have been more than enough!” Stunned to realize she’d been close to shouting, Felicity immediately lowered her voice and pointed stiffly at the door. “You were not invited here, Mr. Spencer, you are certainly not welcome, and I need you to leave before the children wake up.”

Felix scratched at the bristle on his jaw. “Here I thought ye would be friendlier first thing in the morning.”

“You thought incorrectly.” She squared her shoulders, determined to get him out the door before he could charm his way in any further, for in addition to her exasperation she was beginning to feel the stirrings of desire as well.

Before she met Felix she’d never known the two could go hand in hand. Anger and lust. Irritation and arousal. Like two opposite sides of

the same coin, there was no telling which one would land on top when the coin was flipped high into the air.

“Mr. Spencer, I really must insist—”

“Ye have soot on the end of your nose.” He stepped forward so quickly and so smoothly that she didn’t have time to blink let alone step out of arm’s reach. His hand touched the side of her cheek. Just a brush of rough knuckles against soft ivory skin, but the spark of electricity it created was nearly enough to send her to her knees.

Oh dear, she thought weakly as desire surged ahead of exasperation.
Oh dear, oh dear.

“Mr. Spencer, you really must—”

“And in your hair.” He lifted a dark silky curl and it wound itself around his finger as if it had a mind of its own.

Traitor, Felicity thought furiously.

“You – you have to leave.” She was trembling. *Why* was she trembling? “Now, if you please.”

“But I don’t please.” His husky voice sent a shiver racing down the nape of her neck while arousal pooled in her belly like sweet, sticky honey. He tilted her chin up, tilted his head down. Their eyes met, dazed violet falling helplessly into deep, deep gold. “In fact, I don’t please a’tall.”

Then he was kissing her again, blast him, and this time she was kissing him *back*.

On a yearning moan she wrapped her arms around his neck, nails digging into skin as she surrendered to the need inside of her. The need to be held. The need to be touched. The need to be wanted. How

long had it been since a man truly *wanted* her? Ezra had stopped so long ago she'd all but forgotten what it felt like.

Felix angled his mouth, deepening the kiss, and Felicity nearly wept from the pleasure of it. Even when Ezra *had* desired it had never been like this. Nothing she'd experienced had ever come close to this.

She pressed herself shamelessly against him, burrowing into the solid plane of his chest.

Her skin burned where it touched him. Tiny licks of flame that were fueling a smoldering fire between her thighs. She writhed, desperate to make the flames burn higher. Burn brighter. She didn't want to just feel the fire. She wanted to be *on* fire.

As if he could sense her mounting arousal Felix growled deep in his throat and shoved his fingers into her hair, sending pins flying in every direction.

Later, she thought dazedly as her lips parted beneath the demanding pressure of his mouth. *I will pick them up later.*

She tasted coffee on his tongue. Felt muscles hard as iron beneath her fingertips. Heard his sharp intake of breath when her hands slid down the front of his torso to clutch at the tapered edges of his waistcoat. She pulled and he pushed, forcing her back against the wall.

His arms held her captive as he used his tongue and teeth to claim her, nibbling at her bottom lip, the curve of her ear, the sensitive spot where her neck and shoulder met. Her chest rose and fell in time with her ragged breaths and her nipples ached when they scraped against the fabric of her thin bodice.

She wanted to feel the weight of his hands on her breasts. She wanted to feel the weight of his hands *everywhere*. And then suddenly, so suddenly it felt as though a bucket of cold water had been dumped over her head, she didn't.

"Wait," she gasped, pushing weakly against Felix's chest. "I – I cannot do this."

Hands shoving her backwards. Mouth curled in a leer.

"This is what you've wanted, isn't it?"

Her voice trapped inside her body. Her arms limp at her sides.

"This is what you've been asking for..."

"No," she whispered. "No. I said **NO!**"

At her shrill cry Felix immediately released her and jumped back, his tawny gaze filled with confusion as it swept across her trembling frame. "Felicity love, what's wrong?"

"I said no," she whispered, wrapping her arms around herself in an effort to contain the helpless quivering of her limbs. "I said no."

"Aye." His nod was slow and wary. "That ye did."

"I..." At a loss for words and unable to explain, she could only shake her head. Dark curls, tangled from Felix's fingers, tumbled into her face as she peered up at him out of eyes glazed with tears. "I am sorry. I did not – I did not mean to shout."

Not at him, at least. She hadn't meant to shout at him. *Rodger* was the one she really wanted to yell at. But Rodger was dead and Felix was here and she'd spoken without thinking. Spoken the words she wished she'd been able to speak all those years ago when a horrible, despicable man had done the unimaginable.

She had worked so hard at blocking the memory of that morning that sometimes she thought she'd actually succeeded. There were days, weeks, even months where she didn't think about it. Where she did not lay awake at night staring up at the ceiling and replaying every atrocious second in her mind. Every touch. Every kiss. Every grunt and groan as Rodger shoved himself into her.

Then something as simple as a touch would bring it all rushing back. Every single horrible minute. And she'd realize it was never going to go away. Not completely. It would always be a part of her because there were some things a person simply could not forget, no matter how hard they tried.

Ezra had never understood that. He had believed it was something she just needed to get over, like a hacking cough or a fear of heights. So they'd both pretended she had forgotten it, and if she froze during their intimate moments, if her eyes turned glassy and she started gasping for air as dark, cloudy waves of panic rolled over her, it was because she wasn't feeling well. Or because of something she ate. Or because of the weather. But it was never, ever because of what had really happened.

"Ye have nothing to apologize for." Felix took a step towards her. On a soft murmur of distress she shied to the side and he stopped short, his brow creasing in wounded bewilderment. "What have I—"

"Mum?" Standing in the bedroom doorway with his little fists rubbing at his eyes, Henry's jaw stretched in an enormous yawn. "Mum, what is Mr. Spencer doing here?"

Feeling dazed and dizzy and not entirely well, Felicity made a half-

hearted attempt to fix a smile on her face. She did not need Henry's frown to tell her the attempt had failed, but it was the best she could do. "Mr. Spencer came to deliver a message from Aunt Scarlett. But he was just on his way out the door. Weren't you, Mr. Spencer?"

Please, her violet eyes begged. Please, just this once, listen to me.

"Aye," Felix said after a long pause where he searched her face for the secrets she was not ready to tell. "Aye, I was on my out."

"Did you bring your sloop?" Henry asked, his sleepy face brightening with excitement.

"No lad, not today. Tomorrow maybe," he said, sliding a sideways glance at Felicity. "Take care of your mother for me, won't ye lad? And your sister. See to it she doesn't get into trouble, or cause your mother any. You're the man of the house. It's your responsibility to look after your women."

Henry nodded seriously, the sloop all but forgotten. "Yes sir. I will, sir."

"That's a good lad," Felix crouched down and ruffled his hair. "We'll make a Runner out of you yet."

"Did you hear him, Mum?" Henry said excitedly after Felix was gone. "Did you *hear* him? I am going to be a Runner!"

"I heard him darling," Felicity murmured as she wrapped her arms around Henry and drew him tightly against her waist, taking comfort in his warmth and his sturdiness and his boyish grin.

Her life may have been crumbling into pieces but her son was happy. Her son was happy, and Felix was partly responsible. It was something to think about. When her head was clear and her heart

wasn't aching and her bones didn't feel hollow it was something to think about. "I heard him."

CHAPTER EIGHT

I'm going to find the bastard who put that fear in her eyes, Felix vowed silently, and I'm going to rip him limb from limb.

If Ezra Whitten thought he was safe in his gilded house in Grosvenor Square he was sorely mistaken. There was nowhere he could go. No place he could hide. Felix would find him. And when he did...when he did there would not be enough of the viscount left to identify his body.

He could feel the tight leash he kept on his temper beginning to loosen. Others must have felt it as well for he was given a wide berth as he made his way towards Bow Street. Two well-bred ladies, parasols in hand, nearly stepped into the path of an oncoming carriage in their haste to get out of his way.

"Watch where you're going," he growled after he had yanked them both back to the safety of the pavement. Unfortunately, they did not take very kindly to his kindness.

"Unhand me, you brute!" one of them cried in a voice so shrill it made Felix wince. He winced again when the other woman struck him on the shoulder with her beaded reticule.

Bloody 'ell. What the devil was she keeping in there? Rocks?

"Now see here," he said, rubbing his shoulder, "I was only tryin'

to—”

“Is this ruffian bothering you?” Appearing seemingly out of nowhere, Grant offered the women a charming grin that had them instantly flocking to his side. It certainly didn’t hurt that he looked every inch the duke in his snowy white cravat, royal blue tailcoat, and high-waisted breeches. He might as well have had ‘Rich Nabob’ scrawled across his forehead whereas Felix, in his loose-fitting jacket and open collared shirt, could not have appeared more common.

“He was trying to rob us!”

“He tried to take my reticule!”

Felix snorted. “I’d need a damn winch to lift it off your arm.”

“I am not surprised,” Grant said seriously. “We’ve had complaints about him before. Not to worry ladies, I promise he will not bother you again. In fact, I will see to it he is delivered straight to Bow Street.”

“Oh thank you, my lord,” they both gushed. “You saved our lives.”

“And who kept ye from being flat as a flounder?” Felix wanted to know. “Aye, that’s right. I did. You’re bloody welcome,” he grumbled under his breath as the women gave Grant one last adoring glance before they snapped open their parasols and glided away.

“Wooing the ladies first thing in the morning, are we?” Sunlight reflected off Grant’s mocking grin as he fell in step beside Felix.

Grinding his teeth, Felix considered the consequences of sending the arrogant bounder sprawling on his arse...and ultimately decided it wasn’t worth the trouble. He may have gotten in one lucky clip to the jaw, but Grant was surprisingly agile for a blueblood and he didn’t

pull his punches. The two men had gone toe to toe before and although neither one had been able to claim victory, they'd both been laid up in bed for the better part of a week. Felix had no interest in repeating the experience, or the blustering reprimand that had followed when the Captain discovered two of his best runners were out of commission.

But that didn't mean he had to be civil.

"Sod off," he grunted before he turned left down an alley so narrow his shoulders nearly scraped against the walls.

"We're both going to the same address." Undeterred by the small space, Grant fell back behind him but continued to follow; an annoying shadow he couldn't get rid of. "Unless you want to stop by Newgate first. I'm certain they have a cell ready and waiting with your name on it."

"Aye you'd like that, wouldn't ye?" Felix sneered.

"Nothing would please me more."

"Then ye should have put me there when ye had the chance." His sneer turned into a smirk when he angled a backwards glance over his shoulder and saw Grant's jaw clench and his green eyes flash. He knew it stuck in the aristocrat's craw that he was the one criminal he hadn't put behind bars. Which was why he reminded him of his failure every time the opportunity presented itself. There were few things he liked better than getting under Grant's skin. And nothing infuriated Grant more than the knowledge that Felix was not only out walking the streets, he was policing them.

"There's time yet." Although Grant's tone was light, the underlying

threat was unmistakable. Felix allowed it to slide off his back without a moment's concern. High Society may have deemed Grant the worthier man in the ballroom, but on Bow Street they were equals. And unless Owen suddenly keeled over and Grant became the captain, there was nothing he could do about it.

The two men continued on in silence until they reached the building that served as their main office, a traditional three story brick house set back from the street behind a wrought iron fence. White shutters framed large windows and green ivy covered one wall, creeping up along the reddish brick in a tangle of leaf and vine.

The stately residence had once been the private home of Henry Fielding, Chief Magistrate and founder of the Runners. Following his death, his brother, Sir John Fielding, had taken control and turned the Runners – then a ragtag group of eight – into a fully functioning agency. He had eventually stepped down at the ripe old age of sixty-seven and Owen, with great reluctance, had taken his place.

At its height Bow Street had boasted a force of nearly four dozen men. But a diminishing crime rate and the rise of the Metropolitan Police Force had seen that number gradually shrink to ten over the past few years. Eleven if they counted Mrs. Wadsworth, a black cat who had been living at Bow Street for as long as anyone could remember.

Felix gave the feline an absent pat on her head as he walked through the front door and into the large, sparsely decorated room where they conducted most of their business. A large table cluttered with stacks of paper, pieces of evidence, and Runner's boots took up

most of the space. Taking one of the few remaining seats, Felix found a place for his feet between a pile of rags and a pitcher of water while Grant went to the far end.

Linking his hands together behind his neck, he tipped his chair back and took a cursory glance around the table as he noted who was present and who they were still waiting on. Morning meetings were a carryover from when the first Fielding had been in charge. He'd used them to check in with his Runners, discuss ongoing cases, and air any complaints. Now they were held more out of habit than necessity, but woe be the man who was late under Captain Steel's watch.

As was his right, Owen sat at the head of the table. Tall and broad shouldered with dark hair that was beginning to gray at the temples and a glacial stare, he was a man of great integrity and responsibility. The son of a baker, he had come from the humblest of beginnings and risen to a position of high authority solely off of his own merit, a feat which not very many men could claim.

Felix still remembered, with vivid clarity, the first time he'd met Owen. How could he ever forget? It had been in the wee hours of a December morning so cold his breath had turned to frost the moment it touched the air. He should have been in bed with his mistress, a doe-eyed blonde actress whose talents between the sheets far exceeded those on the stage. But instead he'd followed a tip that had led him straight into a trap.

It was still a point of embarrassment for Felix that he'd made himself such an easy target. He'd known something wasn't right. He'd felt it in his bones. But he had been arrogant, and greedy, and he'd

gone after Lady Irvine's emerald necklace even though the little voice in the back of his head had told him not to.

The house was pitch black when he entered. He gave his eyes a moment to adjust as he silently untied his boots and left them by the servant's entrance before proceeding up the stairs. Dressed from head to toe in all black, he was nothing more than a shadow as he walked quickly down the hall, counting out the doors he passed in his head.

Lady Irvine's private dressing quarters were six doors down on the right. He knew that because he'd overheard it at The Three-Eyed Stag the night before. Just as he'd overheard that she'd recently been given a necklace by her lover rumored to be worth more than the King's own crown.

It was rare that Felix relied on second-hand information, but the opportunity had been too good to pass up. Something which Owen, only just appointed as captain of the Runners and seeking to prove he deserved the title, had been counting on.

He let Felix feel the weight of the necklace in his hand before he stepped out from behind the curtain. Another Runner appeared at the door, and yet another emerged from the closet. Still holding the necklace, Felix slowly turned to face them and lifted his arms above his head.

"Out for a midnight jaunt, are we boys?" he said easily even as his stomach sank and a line of perspiration gleamed above his brow. Bloody bugging hell. He'd really stepped in it this time. There would be no scraping his way out. Not when he was surrounded by three Runners holding pistols pointed straight at his heart.

“Why don’t ye go on and lower those,” he suggested. “Ye’ve caught me fair and square lads, and I’ve no intention of going to Newgate with a hole in my chest.”

“You’ll go how we want you to go,” growled a tall, lean man with green eyes. “It’s over, Spencer. This is it. The end of the line.”

Felix mustered a grin. “Well at least I led ye on a merry chase. I suppose you’ll be wanting this back.” He looked up at the necklace dangling from his fingertips with genuine regret. It was easily the prettiest piece he’d ever held. And he’d been *this* close to pocketing it. Damn Runners. Couldn’t they leave a man be to live his own life? What had he ever done to them?

“You have been a thorn in London’s side for too long,” Green Eyes continued. “It is going to be a pleasure to finally pull you out.”

“Too bad your father didn’t think to do the same with your mother,” Felix muttered.

Those green eyes flared and then narrowed to slits. “What did you just say?”

“Ye heard me. I said too bad—”

“That is enough.” The man who’d stepped out from behind the curtain did not need to raise his voice for the other Runners to snap to attention, which told Felix who was really in charge. He held out his hand. “Lady Irvine’s necklace, if you please.”

Felix bloody well did *not* please, but what other choice did he have? He’d been caught fair and square and there was nothing to do now but surrender with dignity.

With great reluctance he handed the necklace over and then was

forced to watch as it was put back into Lady Irvine's jewelry box. All in all it had been a good run, he decided. If he had to go out he'd rather it be like this: caught in the act with a fortune's worth of emeralds glinting in the palm of his hand. But instead of putting him in handcuffs, the leader asked the other two Runners to step outside.

"Are you sure, Captain?" Green Eyes frowned. "Spencer's a tricky one."

"If I am longer than five minutes you can presume Mr. Spencer has knocked me out cold and escaped out the window." His teeth flashed in a humorless smile. "But I hope I would not be so inept, or he so foolish. Would you, Mr. Spencer?"

"No sir. Wouldn't dream of it," Felix lied.

"There, you see? Now go," he told the other two Runners brusquely. Once he and Felix were alone he cupped the back of his neck and walked to the window. Staring out into the night he said, "We have been chasing you a long time, Mr. Spencer. You're better than most."

Felix lifted his chin. "I'm the best."

"Yes," the Captain agreed. "You are. Which is why instead of wasting your talents, I'd like to use them."

"I...don't understand."

"It is quite simple, Mr. Spencer." The Captain glanced back at him over his shoulder. "Would you like to spend the rest of your days rotting away in a cell...or would you like to come work for me on Bow Street? The choice is yours."

FELIX OFTEN WONDERED why Owen had given him a second

chance. The closest he could figure was that the Captain had looked at him and seen a bit of himself. He'd never been a jewel thief, but he knew what it was like to come from nothing. Something Grant, who had been born with a silver spoon shoved so far up his arse his teeth glinted, would never understand.

Owen caught Felix's gaze across the table and gave him a cursory nod which Felix returned. Hawke sat to the Captain's left, looking surly as ever, and beside him was Archer Brentwood, a gangly, fresh-faced lad straight out of Eton. Like Grant, he came from noble blood. Unlike Grant, he wasn't a complete and utter wanker.

Felix liked the boy. He may have been a tad odd, but he was also smart as a whip which was why the Captain had recruited him. Archer saw things others didn't. He had an impeccable eye for detail and nuance, as well as an uncanny knack for always being able to tell when someone was lying.

Two chairs down from Archer was Tobias Kent, a brooding, black-haired Irishman with a thick brogue and a very personal reason for being at Bow Street.

His wife had been murdered three days shy of their first wedding anniversary. Killed on her way home from the market, her throat slit clean across and her body left out for the beggars to pick clean. Kent had become a Runner shortly thereafter and even though two years had passed since his wife's death he was still consumed with finding her killer. Recently his vengeance had taken a dark turn, leading everyone to give him a wide berth. No one wanted to be on the receiving end of that unpredictable Irish temper.

Sitting a safe distance away were the Ferguson brothers, Ian and Colin. Different as night and day, those two were, even though to look at their rugged faces, wheat colored hair, and hazel eyes one would be hard pressed to tell them apart.

Ian was a serious, by-the-letter sort while Colin tended to flirt with the edges of the law. Which most likely explained why he and Felix got on so well.

There were only two Runners missing and as soon as they arrived Owen began the meeting by going through their current cases, the majority of which consisted of petty theft, burglary, and two highway robberies.

“And where are we on our slippery jewel thief?” he asked, raising a brow at Grant.

“She’s struck ten houses over the past six months. Every time I believe I’m closing in she disappears again.” The corners of his mouth tightened. “I think she has at least one accomplice.”

“Or maybe you’re just too slow,” Felix suggested.

“Or maybe it’s one of your old lovers and you’re giving her fair warning.”

Felix tipped his chair forward. “Is that an accusation?”

“No. That’s–”

“Enough,” Owen said mildly. “That’s enough. This thief needs to be caught. Lord Munthorpe is threatening to take his business to the Bobbies if his wife’s necklace isn’t recovered and I can’t say as I blame him. Which is why the two of you are going to work the case together.”

“Us?” Felix and Grant exclaimed in unison.

“Yes,” said Owen, blue eyes glinting with amusement. “You.”

CHAPTER NINE

FELIX COULD THINK OF a hundred things he would rather do than work alongside the likes of Grant Hargrave. Starting with cutting off his own arm. But when Owen gave a direct order there was no getting around it and so the next morning the two men found themselves walking together in stony silence, neither one of them acknowledging the other until they were standing outside the gate of 374 Beacon Lane.

“What did she take this time?” Felix asked, shifting his weight back onto his heels and slanting a hand across his brow to block out the sun as he gazed up at the private residence of their jewelry thief’s latest victim. The three-story brick house was nearly identical to every other house in this particular section of Grosvenor Square, right down to the blue shutters and blossoming cherry tree in the front garden.

“I do not know yet.” Grant pushed open the gate and proceeded up the narrow stone walkway. “The report was vague. A necklace, I would assume. Usually only one. Rather odd she wouldn’t take more given the trouble it must take to break in, but nothing about this case has made sense from the beginning.”

“Ye don’t see many female burglars,” Felix agreed as he closed the

gate and followed Grant up the walkway.

“No, you do not.” Pulling off his hat, Grant tucked it under his arm and raked a hand through his hair. “Particularly ones who have a penchant for knives.”

“I heard she stuck ye.” Felix grinned broadly, delighted by the fact that the mighty Grant Hargrave had been stopped in his tracks by a woman. And not just any woman, but a common thief. If they ever did catch the lass he didn’t know which he would be tempted to do more: put her in handcuffs or buy her a drink.

“She *almost* stuck me,” Grant corrected with a narrow-eyed glare. “But her days of freedom are numbered. I’ve tracked her all the way to Dickens Square. She’s running out of places to hide.”

“Dickens Square is a big place.”

“Not big enough.”

Felix rubbed his chin. “What does she look like, this jewel thief of yours?”

“She’s not *my* jewel thief,” Grant said quickly. Too quickly to Felix’s way of thinking.

There was something there whether he chose to admit it or not. Having felt the same thing with Felicity from the moment they’d first met, Felix recognized the signs all too well.

It was a tiny flicker of desire.

A spark of attraction.

A whisper of lust.

Only time would tell whether the flicker became a flame and the whisper turned into a shout. For his own personal entertainment Felix

hoped that it did. Grant would be well served with a little complication in his perfect, holier-than-thou life. And what was more complicated than falling for a woman he couldn't have?

"All you need to know is that she's quick as a snake and twice as mean." Grant absently rubbed his side where Felix assumed the chit had gotten a bit too close for comfort with one of her knives. But before he could respond with a pithy remark the door opened to reveal a footman who quickly ushered both men into the front parlor. The large room was comfortably decorated with heavy furniture in matching shades of green, gold drapes, and a large fireplace framed with tile.

"Lord Ashburn will be but a moment," said the footman. "Can I offer you gentlemen any refreshments?"

Felix's head whipped around with so much force he felt a distinct *pop* in his neck. "What name did ye say?" he asked in a soft, soft voice that had the footman's brow creasing with confusion and a hint of wariness.

"Lord Ashburn, sir. Is – is something the matter?"

A dark, predatory smile twisted Felix's mouth. "No. Nothing is the matter a'tall."

"IT'S LOVELY." Standing in the middle of Scarlett's vaulted foyer, Felicity turned in a slow circle as she admired the house the Steel's had finally purchased after months of searching for just the right one. It had been no small task given the newlywed's conflicting tastes, but they'd managed to do it with a three-story row house that boasted

hints of Grecian architecture, high ceilings, and hardwood floors polished to a glossy shine. As they'd just moved in the rooms were still largely devoid of furniture and her voice echoed in the empty space when she added, "I can see why you chose it."

"Should I show you your bedroom now or wait until later?" Scarlett asked with an innocent smile that Felicity saw straight through. Wandering over to an empty marble pedestal, she trailed her fingers across the top of it before she lifted her head and looked her friend square in the eye.

"No," she said firmly.

"But Filly—"

"No. That is a lovely dress, by the by. I do not believe I've seen you wear it before."

Today Scarlett wore a sprigged muslin walking dress in soft violet with lace at the sleeves and a gauze overlay on the bodice. It was not an elegant evening gown by any means, but it made Felicity's blue and white checkered gingham look both old and dowdy in comparison.

Before the divorce she had never thought twice about her wardrobe. It was a forgone conclusion that every autumn she would be fitted for a myriad of dresses in a variety of fabrics, as well as wraps, shawls, and unmentionables. Money had never been an issue. Ezra may not have been a duke, but he'd inherited a generous sum from his father and when she was his wife she had never wanted for anything.

It made her feel foolish, and a bit vain, to have taken everything

she'd been given for granted. As the wife of a peer she'd merely accepted it as her due, and it had never crossed her mind that it might one day all be taken away. Now she had three dresses to her name instead of three dozen and they were all rapidly falling out of fashion as hemlines lengthened, sleeves shortened, and heavy silk gave way to lighter, more versatile fabrics like cotton.

Not that it really mattered *what* her dresses looked like. She could wear the Duchess of Kent's most expensive gown and still not be welcomed at Almack's, or anywhere else for that matter. But it wasn't herself she was the most concerned about. It was her children.

Ezra had been a bit more benevolent with their parting wardrobes than his wife's, but Anne and Henry were growing like weeds and it would only be a matter of months – mayhap weeks – before their clothes no longer fit. Then what was she supposed to do?

A worry for tomorrow, she told herself firmly. On the way to Scarlett's house she had made herself a promise that for one day she would not let the heavy weight of her responsibilities and an uncertain future drag her down into a pit of worry and despair. For one day – for one blissful, sunny day – she wanted to embrace all of the things she had instead of all the things she had not.

Two beautiful, healthy children.

A dear friend she could once again consider a sister.

A man who made her blood heat and her knees weaken.

Felicity's gaze dropped to the floor as she felt a blush warm her cheeks. Now where had *that* thought come from? After their last torrid encounter had ended in tears she thought she'd successfully pushed

any thought of Felix to the back of her mind, but apparently he'd been lurking in the shadows just waiting for the right opportunity to make his appearance known.

Pesky man.

It was bad enough he showed up on her doorstep whenever he pleased. She did not need to be thinking about him when he wasn't even here! It reminded her of a stray cat her mother had made the mistake of feeding once. All it had taken was one bowl of milk and the cat had begun scratching at their window at all hours of the day and night. Nothing would make it go away and finally, in a fit of desperation, her mother had allowed it into the house where it had lived quite happily for seven long years.

"It is quite lovely, isn't it?" Scarlett's dress flared out from her waist as she turned in a quick circle. "I wasn't sure about the color, but--"

"Felix Spencer kissed me," Felicity blurted.

"--my seamstress insisted it would be all the rage come spring and she...was...*what* did you say?"

"Felix Spencer kissed me."

"Yes." Scarlett looked at her oddly. "Last summer in my bedchamber. You told me that already, don't you remember? Although that *does* remind me that he still has not returned my jewelry. I am going to have to talk to Owen about that."

Hands curling into tiny fists, Felicity began to pace circles around the marble pedestal. "Yes, that was the first time he kissed me."

"You say that as though there have been other times."

"There have! Two. Two other times. In the middle of Hyde Park and

in my kitchen yesterday morning. Or is it my parlor?” She threw up her hands. “It doesn’t matter. The point is he kissed me again. Twice.”

Scarlett blinked. “One kiss could be ascribed to the heat of the moment, but three...well, that’s two more than one.”

“Thank you so very much for the arithmetic lesson,” Felicity huffed.

“Do not get belligerent with me. *You* are the one who has been hiding kisses.” She tilted her head to the side. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I did not think it would become anything. No, that is not true.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. Forced herself to take a deep, even breath. “It is *because* I thought it might become something that I did not tell you. I believed if I pushed it under the rug—”

“It would disappear?” A wry smile pulled at the corners of Scarlett’s mouth. “I used to believe the very same thing. Unfortunately that only works for dust, not love.”

“Love.” Startled, Felicity stopped short as her heart gave a hard *thud* inside of her chest. “I do not love Felix Spencer.”

Scarlett closed the distance between them and clasped Felicity’s hands. Giving a gentle squeeze she said, “Don’t you?”

“No. Yes. Oh, I do not know.” Distressed, she could only shake her head. “I thought I loved Ezra and look how that turned out.”

“Ezra is as worthless as a tit on a chicken.”

A choked laugh forced its way past Felicity’s lips. “I cannot believe you said that.”

“I overheard one of the Runner’s use it and I’ve been waiting for the

opportunity. But I should have said it far sooner.”

“Why didn’t you?” she asked, looking searchingly into Scarlett’s clear gray gaze.

“Because I know what it is like to think you know someone, only to have it turn out that you never really knew them at all. It hurts,” she said as tears gathered in Felicity’s eyes. “It hurts your heart and your soul. But worse than that, far worse to my mind, is it makes you doubt yourself.”

“Yes,” Felicity whispered. “Yes it does.”

“You did not do anything wrong. Look at me,” she said when Felicity’s gaze dropped to the floor. “Look,” she repeated, and with great reluctance Felicity forced herself to meet Scarlett’s fierce stare. “Ezra is a pompous bastard and he never deserved you. You’re well to be rid of him.”

One of the hundreds of tears Felicity had been desperately trying to keep at bay slid down her cheek. “I know that. Truly I do. But it does not make it any easier.”

“No,” Scarlett agreed. “I am afraid the only thing that can do that is time. Time and a few passionate kisses.” Her eyebrows darted up and down. “Is Felix a good kisser? He looks as though he would be. All rough and roguish.”

As her tears gave way to a mortified giggle, Felicity pulled her hands free and covered her face. “You cannot ask me that!”

“I certainly can.”

“Then I decline to answer.”

“Which is all the answer I need.” Her eyes glinting with a

mischievous light, Scarlett tucked a short blonde curl behind her ear.

She had cut her hair in an act of defiance right before Rodger died and she had kept it shorn close to the nape of her neck ever since. The bold style became her, just as Felicity's soft, romantic tresses suited her. As inconsequential as it seemed, their hair was a fitting analogy for how very different the two women were.

Scarlett had always been the more outspoken and audacious one, while Felicity preferred to conduct herself with quiet grace. Scarlett threw herself into a problem without any thought for the consequences while Felicity carefully weighed every single option before making a decision. Scarlett followed her heart while Felicity always listened to her head. Yet for all of their differences they had both ended up in the same place.

Married to monsters.

Walking away from the marble pedestal, Felicity went across the foyer until she had a clear view of the rear garden where Henry and Anne were romping about the neatly trimmed lawn with the reckless abandon of two puppies. Satisfied they remained under the watchful eye of Scarlett's maid, she turned back towards her friend and, after a moment's hesitation, decided to admit the truth. "I would be lying if I did not say there are certain parts of Felix that are...appealing."

Scarlett lifted a brow. "I can only imagine what those parts are. It makes a difference, you know. The size. I thought all men were the same before Owen and I became intimate." Her mouth curved in a satisfied, catlike smile. "They're not."

"Scarlett."

“What?” The blonde’s shoulders lifted and fell in a shrug. “It *does* make a difference and something tells me you would be very pleased with your Mr. Spencer.”

“I was talking about his kisses.” Felicity’s face could not have been any hotter than if it were on fire. “Not–not–” Oh, she couldn’t even say it! Scarlett, of course, did not have any such reservations.

“His member?” she suggested innocently. “His tackle? His prodigious engine? His stiff steed? His arbor vitae?”

“Arbor vitae sounds like a tree.”

“Let’s hope it is an oak and not a sapling.”

Felicity’s blush spread all the way down to her collarbone. “I do not care to discuss this any longer.”

“Are you sure? We were just getting to the best part. Oh all right,” Scarlett sighed when she realized she’d pushed Felicity as far as she could. “Enough teasing. When are you going to see Felix again?”

“I do not know if I am.”

“And why not? You just said you found him appealing.”

“I said I found *parts* of him appealing.”

“That still does not answer my question. Why would you not want to see him again?”

“Because – because I have never known an affair that ended well for both parties. And I do not only have myself to consider.” Felicity chewed on the inside of her cheek as she walked to one of the front windows and peered out through the clear glass, gloved fingers pressing down on the freshly painted sill. Scarlett had chosen a soft white for the wooden trim that framed the windows and doors. The

walls were bare, the old paper stripped away to make room for the new. And even though it was silly and foolish and melancholy, she felt a pang of sympathy for the old paper. Not so long ago it had been carefully chosen over all the other wallpapers that were available. It had been loved. Admired. Now it was sitting in an old bin somewhere, crumpled up and forgotten.

“How do you know he wants an affair?” Scarlett asked.

“What else could he possibly want?”

“Marriage? Oh, do not look at me like that.” Gliding up beside Felicity, she tucked her hands behind her back as she looked out at the street. A chestnut horse trotted past, pulling a buggy with a man and a woman inside. On their way to the park, no doubt, as it was another bright, beautiful day with nary a cloud in the sky. “Is it so far out of the realm of possibility that a handsome, charming man would want to marry you?”

“I really do not think—”

“Or,” Scarlett continued, her eyes narrowing, “is it that *you* do not want to marry *him* because he is a commoner? Because I have gone down that path, and I can tell you from personal experience that it is not lined with rose petals and rainbows.”

“No one is talking about marriage!” Flustered, Felicity threw her hands in the air and stepped away from the sill. “And it does not matter a fiddle to me that Felix is common born. He could be a duke and it would not alter my feelings towards him one way or another.”

“So you do have feelings for him.”

“I did not say that.”

“Then you *don’t* have feelings?”

Felicity hesitated. “I did not say that either.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“I am saying *he* would not want to marry *me*.”

Scarlett’s brow creased. “Why the dickens not?” she demanded.

“Why would any man want to – want to marry me?” Shame caused Felicity’s voice to catch and the back of her neck to burn. “I am ruined.”

“Oh darling.” Scarlett reached out and squeezed her hand. “Don’t you know all the best women are?”

CHAPTER TEN

THE FIRST THING FELIX noticed about Ezra Whitten, Viscount of Ashburn, was how thin he was. Put the man beside a broom handle and he would have all but disappeared. The second thing he noticed was his eyes.

Felix had always prided himself on being able to gauge a person's worth by looking them straight in the eye. A man could disguise his character with his tongue and his title and the number of coins jingling in his pocket, but not with his eyes. And yet when Felix took a good, hard, long look into Ashburn's dark gaze all he saw was an unsettling blankness, like a slate that had been wiped clean.

"Good of you men to come so early. This has been very disconcerting." Ashburn spoke with the clear, crisp dialect of someone who had never stepped within half a mile of the East End. Taking a seat on one side of a mahogany coffee table he gave a clipped nod to indicate Felix and Grant should sit on the other.

"I'll remain standing if it's all the same to ye." Felix's smile was as thin and sharp as the edge of a razor. It sharpened when Ashburn brushed him off with a deliberate turn of his head and focused solely on Grant.

Felix was accustomed to being overlooked and underestimated,

especially by the likes of Ezra Whitten. Wealthy nabobs took one glance at the wooden buttons on his jacket, or heard his distinctive vernacular, and immediately judged themselves superior. Usually it didn't bother him. But damned if he wasn't primed to jump over the table, wrap his hands around Ashburn's skinny little neck, and squeeze until those blank eyes bulged.

Rein it in, he ordered himself as his hands curled into tightly knotted fists. *It's not the time, or the place.*

If he went at the viscount now it would only be a matter of seconds before Grant pulled him off. Which was not nearly enough time to deliver the sort of pain Ashburn deserved for what he'd done to Felicity. For what he'd done to his own damn children.

When he came for Ashburn – and he *would* come for him – it would be at a time and a place of his own choosing. For now he would mind his manners and bite his tongue until it bled if he had to, but he wouldn't tip his cards. Not yet.

Shoving his hands into the pockets of his trousers, he forced himself to take a deep, even breath and backed up until his left shoulder brushed against the edge of a gold-framed painting. It was a portrait of a middle-aged woman with black hair standing beside a piano. The pinched look on her face made it look as though she had a stick shoved up her arse which led him to conclude it was most likely Ashburn's mother.

“What can you tell me about the investigation? One moment.” Ashburn leaned back in his chair as a maid carrying a sterling silver tea service entered the parlor. Carefully depositing the heavy tray on a

sideboard, she filled three porcelain cups with tea and brought them over to the table along with a sugar bowl. At Ashburn's brusque nod she used small tongs to deposit exactly three lumps of sugar into his tea.

"Would anyone else care for some sugar or milk?" she asked.

"None for me, thank you," said Grant.

Felix winked at her. "I'm already sweet enough, love."

The maid blushed as she hurried from the room, her shoes sinking silently into the thick blue and gold carpet. Once she'd discreetly closed the door Ashburn took a sip of tea and then levelled his cool, unblinking gaze at Grant.

"Well?" he said. "Has the thief been apprehended yet or not?"

"I am afraid not yet, my lord." As comfortable in the opulently appointed parlor as Felix was in the narrow alleyways of St. Giles, Grant procured a monogrammed handkerchief from the breast pocket of his waistcoat and studiously wiped his hands before lifting his cup by its delicate handle. "But we're getting closer." He sipped his tea.

"I had hoped you would come with better news than 'getting closer'." Ashburn's eyebrows made Felix think of two black centipedes as they crawled together over the bridge of his nose. "It seems to me this thief is getting bolder by the day. None of us are safe. How much longer can we expect this to go on?"

"We'll catch the culprit. Never fear." Grant met Ashburn's frown of disapproval with an amiable grin that did not quite reach his eyes. "You said in your report that your wife's necklace was taken?"

"Yes." Ashburn set his cup down on the edge of the table with a

hard *click*. “She has not been able to sleep since.”

“And what wife would that be?” Felix asked. “Your first, or your second?”

So much for biting his tongue.

Ashburn’s face paled, then flushed a dull, mottled red. “How dare you.”

“Oh, I dare,” Felix said silkily, pushing off the wall with the heel of his boot. “I dare very much.”

“Please excuse my associate.” Shooting up out of his chair, Grant shot Felix a fierce warning glare before he turned his attention back to Ashburn. “He has a poor habit of speaking before he thinks. Or forgetting to think at all.”

Ashburn’s gaze lingered on Felix. “And these are seen as admirable traits in a Runner?”

“Some of us are a tad coarser than the rest, but we manage to get the job done.” Grant sat back down. “I can assure you Mr. Spencer will not ask any more questions. But I have a few. Beginning with what room the necklace was taken from.”

“My wife’s dressing chamber.” Ashburn cleared his throat. “She has a velvet-lined jewelry box where she keeps her more expensive pieces. It was taken from there.”

“Was the jewelry box locked?” asked Grant.

“Yes.”

“Was anything else taken?”

“No.” He thought about it for a moment, then shook his head.

“Nothing else.”

“And the two of you were not at home during the burglary?”

“No. We were at a dinner party on the other side of the square. We departed at a quarter past eight and did not return until midnight.”

Taking out a small leather-bound journal and a pencil, Grant made note of the times. “When did you discover the necklace was missing?”

“That night. When my wife went to return her diamond earrings.” When he heard Felix’s snort of disgust Ashburn looked up at him with narrowed eyes. “Have I insulted or slighted you in some way I am not aware of?”

“Aye. You’re still breathing.”

“Mind yourself,” Grant warned through clenched teeth, but this time Felix paid him no heed. He did not approach Ashburn. He didn’t trust himself enough to get within striking distance of the bastard. But his bristling animosity reached the viscount regardless.

“What sort of selfish, unfeeling bastard dresses his wife in diamonds,” he growled, “while the mother of his children goes hungry?”

“Ah, now it makes sense,” Ashburn said with quiet understanding. “Felicity must be one of your whores.”

Felix made it to the table before Grant intercepted him. The two men grappled, fists flying wildly as they slammed back against the wall. Ashburn’s mother fell to the floor with a crash. A chair toppled. Felix caught an uppercut with his jaw and tasted blood before he punched his fist into Grant’s kidney.

“Bloody hell. What’s gotten into you?” Grant demanded, grimacing as he favored his right side.

“*Him.*” Felix tried to lunge towards Ashburn again. Anticipating the move Grant jabbed his elbow into Felix’s throat. The dirty blow left him wheezing for air. He managed one last punch before he doubled over, hands bracing against his knees as he struggled to breathe. Staggering away, Grant leaned against a long-case clock and waved his arm in Ashburn’s general direction.

“We’ll see ourselves out.”

“WHAT THE HELL did you do?” Owen snarled. Blue eyes flashing, he stalked across his office and slammed his fist down on his desk with so much force the entire floor shook. “Your antics just cost us not one, but three clients. Three!” Pinching his temple, he turned and faced the wall. “I cannot even bloody look at the two of you.”

“Spencer started it.” Grant leaned back in his chair and linked his hands behind his head. “He would have clocked Ashburn out cold if I didn’t hold him back.”

Felix snorted. “Ye didn’t hold me back, mate.”

“That purple bruise on your face says otherwise.”

“And what about that purple bruise on your mug? Oh wait,” he sneered. “That’s just your face.”

Grant barked out a laugh. “That’s bloody rich coming from the likes of you.”

“Do you find this *amusing*?” Owen asked in a voice that was whisper soft and all the more dangerous because of it.

“No Captain,” Felix and Grant said in unison.

“Is your job a *joke* to you?”

“No Captain,” they repeated.

“Then what the devil were you thinking? You,” he said, pivoting and jabbing a finger at Felix. “You should know by now that we do not conduct ourselves like common criminals. We’re Runners. Not wild animals. And *you*.”

“What did I do?” Grant demanded when Owen levelled his icy stare straight at his second-in-command.

“It is what you did *not* do that concerns me. I made Spencer your partner for a reason. You were supposed to keep him in line and instead you nearly allowed him to attack one of our clients!” Owen was no longer whispering. His voice reverberated around the office with so much force Felix wouldn’t have been surprised to see the windows rattle. He braced his fingers on the edge of his desk, knuckles whitening as he leaned forward. “The two of you cost us business that we could not afford to lose.

“If the Bobbies have their way the Runners will soon be nothing more than a very thin chapter in a very large history book. Your antics today put all of us one step closer to an early retirement. I hope you are both pleased with yourselves. Now get out,” he growled. “I don’t want to see either one of your ugly faces for the rest of the day.”

Felix and Grant’s chairs scraped against the wooden floorboards as they quickly stood up. Grant started to say something, but then with a shake of his head he turned on his heel and walked out without a word. When Felix tried to follow, Owen called him back.

“Spencer. A word before you go.”

“Aye, Captain?” he said warily.

Owen studied him silently for a moment, his thoughts concealed behind a hard, penetrating gaze. "You should not have lost your temper."

"Aye, Captain." Was this it? Had his time as a Runner finally come to an end? He braced himself for the worst, but on a heavy sigh Owen sat back down behind his desk and said the last words Felix ever expected to hear.

"Good job, Spencer."

"Come again, sir?" he said, certain he'd misheard. Surely the Captain wasn't *congratulating* him for trying to choke a peer to death with his own two hands.

"I said good job. I do not like Ashburn any more than you. The man's a yellow-bellied bastard who deserves more than a punch to the face. So while I cannot officially condone you trying to murder him, neither can I blame you for attempting it."

Well put a pair of tits on me and call me Nancy, Felix thought incredulously. The Captain *was* congratulating him.

"Thank ye?" he said, uncertain how he was supposed to respond.

A faint smile softened the hard lines around the edges of Owen's mouth. "Did you at least get in one good blow?"

"Hargrave's a quick bastard."

"That he is." Owen rested his elbows on his desk. "If another opportunity presents itself I only ask that you make certain Ashburn knows you are not acting on behalf of Bow Street. I should also make it clear that if he's found dead you *will* be brought up on charges of murder, Runner or no Runner."

Felix mulled it over for a minute. "What does beating him within an inch of his worthless life get me? Five years in Newgate?"

"A pat on the back and a glass of my best scotch."

His grin stretched across his entire face. "Aye, sir."

"One more thing before you leave." Owen's smile fell away. "As you no doubt already know, Felicity is a dear friend of mine. She is an even dearer friend of my wife's. I would not be so bold as to interfere in her personal business, but if you harm her in any way, if you so much as cause her one second of discomfort, I am going to have to kill you." There was nothing in his tone to indicate he was anything less than completely serious. "Do we understand one another?"

"Aye, sir. We do."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“MR. SPENCER. OH MY GOODNESS!” Upon seeing Felix sitting beside her front door, his hair tousled and his lip bloody, Felicity gasped and ran towards him, nearly stumbling on a loose cobblestone in her haste to reach his side. She crouched down and, wetting her thumb, gently dabbed at the edge of his mouth. “What – what happened?”

“No need to look like I’m on death’s door, love.” He grinned, then winced when fresh blood trickled down his chin. “Just a little cut is all.”

Felicity frowned. “You may need stitches.”

“It’ll take more than this to get me in front of a leech.”

“Be that as it may, infection is not something to be taken lightly. You should...” She trailed off as she took note of the sliver of purple under his eye and the tear in his shirt. “You’ve been brawling,” she accused, jumping to her feet as compassion was rapidly replaced with disdain.

“Aye,” Felix said cheerfully. “That I have.” Standing as well, he brushed off his trousers before peering over her shoulder. “Where are the little nippers?”

“They are spending the afternoon with my mother.” After Felicity left Scarlett’s she had made a detour to Gracechurch Street where Mrs.

Atwood lived. She'd moved there after Felicity's father died, using the money he'd left her to purchase a modest one-bedroom townhouse. It was much smaller than the home Felicity had grown up in, but it more than suited the needs of a single widow and her yappy white Pomeranian. "Is there something I can help you with, Mr. Spencer?" she asked, her voice considerably cooler than it had been a few seconds ago.

"Aye, that there is." His head canted to the side, those whisky eyes hungrily devouring every inch of her as if they'd been separated for weeks instead of barely a day. "Ye can tell me why ye looked as though ye saw a ghost after our kiss yesterday."

Of course he would ask her for the one thing she absolutely could not give him.

The truth.

If she told him what had happened to her, if she revealed what Rodger had done, then he would look at her in one of two ways. With either pity or disgust, neither of which she wanted. So she drew her shawl more closely around her shoulders, pressed her lips firmly together, and stepped past him to unlock the door, hoping her silence would make it clear their conversation had reached its end.

It didn't.

"I haven't seen ye wear this dress before." Felix touched her sleeve, just a casual brush of fingertips against fabric, but it was enough to cause her to fumble and drop her key when she tried to pull it from her reticule. It struck the ground and then bounced beneath the front step, vanishing from sight.

“Now look what you’ve done.” Annoyed with him – and with herself – Felicity pursed her lips as she considered the best way to fetch her key without sticking her hand into dark, cobwebbed-filled uncertainty. She also wasn’t very keen on getting down on her hands and knees and sticking her rump up in the air with Felix watching.

“Having a spot of trouble, love? Step aside.” Flashing her a roguish grin, he pulled out a thin metal pin from behind his ear. Within seconds the door was unlocked and he gestured her inside with a gallant wave of his arm. “After ye, my lady.”

Picking up her skirts so as not to let the hemline drag on the step, Felicity walked past him with her chin held high. And a rueful smile tugging at the edges of her mouth.

How does he do it? She wondered as he followed her into the flat and closed the door behind him. *How does he infuriate me and charm me all in the same breath?* With Ezra there had never been such a tug and pull. Their relationship had been like the glossy surface of a pond. Smooth, with only the occasional ripple. But with Felix she felt as though she were in the middle of the ocean during a squall. One moment her head was above water, the next it was below. And no matter what she did she couldn’t seem to catch her breath.

“Sit,” she ordered, pointing at the only chair in the room. “Your lip needs tending.” Going into the bedroom she poured some clean water into a basin and wet a strip of flannel. Ringing out the excess moisture, she returned to Felix and, using the skills she’d attained while mending Henry’s various bumps and bruises, leaned over him and began to clean the wound. He sat perfectly straight, the soles of

his boots pressed flat against the floorboards, the palms of his hands pressed flat against the top of his thighs. He sat so still she would have thought he'd ceased breathing if not for the steady rise and fall of his chest.

"Who did this to you?" she asked softly.

"One of the other Runners."

Her hand stilled in surprise. "One of the other *Runners*?"

"Aye. Grant Hargrave. I believe ye were introduced at Bow Street after the wedding."

"Yes, I remember." She recalled a tall, striking man with wavy brown hair and green eyes. If she wasn't mistaken he was a peer. The son of a duke, no less. Although how he'd ended up on Bow Street she hadn't the faintest idea. "He seemed like such a gentleman."

Felix angled his head. "Looks can be deceiving, love."

"Yes." Didn't she know that better than anyone? On the outside Ezra looked like the perfect husband. He had the title. The wealth. The impeccable manners. But beneath the thin veneer of perfection was a man whose heart was as dark and empty as a night without stars. He may have been a gentleman, but he was cold. As cold as a man could possibly be.

And then there was Felix.

Felix, who looked so wrong for her in so many different ways. Felix, who did not have a title or wealth or any discernable manners at all, let alone impeccable ones. Felix, who wouldn't have been able to dance the *valse* if his life depended on it, and who would never be accepted by polite society.

Yet when she was with him none of those things seemed to matter. When she was with him all she could think about was their kiss. And the kiss after that...and the kiss after that.

“Yes,” she repeated, more to herself than to him. “I suppose they can be.”

A bruise was already forming on Felix’s chin, another under his eye. On any other man the marks would have appeared garish, but the smudges of deep purple and dark blue suited him. If anything they made him even more handsome. *Like a pirate*, she thought as she pressed the cool cloth against the swelling on his jaw. *Or a knight of old. One who has just returned home to his beloved after defending his king and country on the fields of battle.*

“I – I was wrong,” she whispered.

“About what?” His fingers closed lightly around her wrist, the pad of his thumb pressing on the beat of her pulse. It thrummed wildly at his touch, a bird beating its wings against the gilded bars of a cage where the door was open, but the bird was too frightened to fly out.

You.

Us.

Everything.

“The cut on your lip.” She pulled her arm back and the damp flannel, stained red with his blood, fell to the floor. “It does not look as though it will need stitches after all.” Closing her eyes, she turned away.

Away from Felix. Away from her own emotions. Away from her own heart.

The chair creaked and she knew he was behind her even before he wrapped his arm around her waist and drew her back against the hard plane of his chest.

“What are ye afraid of?” he murmured, the bristle on his jaw scraping against her cheek as he rested his chin on the sloping curve of her shoulder.

“I am not afraid,” she said, but they both heard the lie in her voice. She began to stiffen, to draw back, but on a soft, whispering sigh she let herself relax against him. After so many months – so many *years* – of nothing but coldness she needed warmth. Like an untended flower that had grown too long in the shade she desperately yearned for the sun. For the heat it gave, and the comfort it brought. For no matter how deep the dark, the sun would always find a way to rise again. And when it did its light would be brighter and reach further than ever before.

“I am not afraid,” she repeated as tears gathered. “I am not afraid.”

“Ah, love.” Felix’s embrace tightened. He began to sway from side to side and she swayed with him, a dance where the only music came from the rhythmic beating of their hearts. “I know ye have no reason to trust me. No reason to believe a bloody word I say. But I want ye to know I’m not him. I won’t hurt ye. I would never hurt ye.”

“I know,” she whispered as a single tear spilled down her cheek. “I know.”

FELIX TOOK HER TO THE Kew Botanical Gardens. And she began to fall in love with him somewhere between the cornflowers and the

columbines.

How could she not? He was everything she had been warned against...and everything she needed. He made her feel safe. More than that, he made her feel treasured in a way Ezra never had.

Felix wanted her. Not because she was well-bred or well-mannered or any other matter of wells. He wanted her for who she was. He wanted her *as* she was. A divorced mother. A spurned woman. A ruined lady. Knowing that, *feeling* that every time he touched her, how could she not want him in return?

A thorn snared her skirt as she and Felix walked past a vibrant wall of Portland Roses. Named for the Duchess of Portland by renowned botanist Andre Du Pont, the rose had been created by crossing an Autumn Damask with a Crimson China. It was a match no one had ever thought to make for the two roses were so very different, but when they'd been brought together they had produced a deep, true red rose that flowered in even the harshest of conditions.

Not wanting her dress to tear, she stopped to untangle herself. But before she could coax the thorn from the delicate fabric Felix used a small knife to sever the branch from the bush. Stripping the thorns from the stem, he tucked the rose beneath her bonnet.

"You shouldn't have done that," she scolded as she cast a furtive glance over her shoulder. "We are going to be thrown out." The gardens, while open to the public, were under the close scrutiny of half a dozen guards who did not take kindly to any flowers being touched, let alone cut. Frowning at Felix, she pulled the flower from her hair with the intention of tossing it off the path. Hide the

evidence, such as it were. But at the last moment she put it inside her reticule instead.

The sentimental gesture did not escape Felix's notice. He said not a word, but she could tell by the gleam in his eye that he was pleased she'd decided to save his token of affection.

"Shall we?" she murmured, and resting her hand lightly on his rigid forearm proceeded down the stone-lined path. Portland Roses soon gave way to sculpted boxwoods and neat clusters of pale pink peonies. Sweet Williams were just beginning to emerge from the freshly raked soil while towering hollyhocks stretched their blossoms towards a clear blue sky. It was a perfect day for a leisurely walk amidst such beauty, and Felicity was glad – albeit admittedly surprised – that Felix had suggested it. He did not seem like the sort of man who would enjoy such a leisurely pursuit and yet here they were, arm in arm, strolling through the winding paths as if they were lord and lady of the manor instead of a disgraced divorcé and a thief turned Runner with bruises on his face.

An incredulous smile touched her lips as they stepped between two rows of towering hedges. If someone had told her eight years ago that this would be her future she would have laughed herself silly. But here she was...and truth be told there was nowhere else she'd rather be. Although it did occur to her (as things often did when she was trying to turn off her mind and simply enjoy the moment at hand) that she knew next to nothing about the man beside her.

She knew he'd been a thief, and now he was Runner. She knew he had a quick wit and a ready smile. She knew that when he touched

her she burned. But what else did she know?

You can always ask, she told herself practically. Surely there is no harm in asking a few sensible questions. After all, this is a man who – if things go accordingly – will be spending time with your children. It is perfectly acceptable to learn more about who he is, and where he's come from. Just one or two general questions ought to do.

“Why did you kiss me in Scarlett’s bedchamber all those months ago?” she blurted.

Oh dear.

Oh dear, oh dear.

That wasn’t what she had intended to ask at *all*. She had wanted to inquire about his past. Where he’d been raised. If he had any siblings. If – her stomach turned queasily at the thought – he’d ever been married. Biting her lip she peeked up at him through her lashes, trying to gauge what he was thinking behind those tawny eyes.

“Why did I kiss ye...” he murmured thoughtfully. His fist bumped against his chin, knuckles rubbing over bristle as he considered his answer. “I suppose because I wanted to.”

“Ah,” she said, feeling foolish. What had she been expecting? A declaration of love? For Felix to get down on bended knee and recite a sonnet? “That – that makes sense, I suppose.”

“And because I knew if I didn’t taste your lips right then and there I was going to starve.” His amber gaze darkened. “Ye were the prettiest woman I’d ever seen. Sitting there in your chair all indignant like. Scolding me for stealin’ your friend’s jewelry when ye should have been trembling in your boots.”

The truth was Felicity *had* been trembling in her boots – or rather in her walking slippers. She'd been afraid he was going to kill her. But then he had kissed her instead and she'd begun trembling for another reason all together.

“You jumped out the window. I thought you were going to break your neck.”

His bruised mouth stretched in a smug grin. “Worried about me, were ye love?”

“I was worried about the azaleas,” she corrected.

“Liar.” He stopped and turned, putting them face to face, chest to chest, thigh to thigh. Felicity let out a startled squeak when he spanned her waist with his hands and yanked her close. “Ye wanted me to kiss ye. Admit it.”

Butterflies danced in her belly. “I did not–”

“Admit it,” he growled, his mouth a hair's breadth from her own.

“Yes,” she breathed, unable to deny the truth any longer. “Yes, I wanted you to kiss me.” Whether by accident or design – she honestly wasn't sure which – her tongue darted out and skimmed across the swell of her bottom lip, drawing Felix's hot, heavy gaze downwards.

“Aye,” he said throatily, the hard rasp of his voice causing the muscles in her abdomen to tighten and clench. “That's what I thought.”

He is going to kiss me again, she thought dazedly. And this time – heaven help me – I want him to. But to her bemusement Felix abruptly released her, gravel crunching beneath the heels of his boots as he stepped back.

“What?” he asked when he saw the flare of disappointment in her eyes she wasn’t quite able to hide. “Ye didn’t think I would kiss ye here, did ye? For shame, Miss Atwood.” He clucked his tongue. “There are people all about. Ye wouldn’t want to besmirch my fine upstanding character, would ye now?”

“No.” The corners of her mouth twitched. “No, I certainly would not want to do that.”

He leaned in close and her gaze grew shuttered when he whispered, “When I kiss ye...when I slowly peel your clothes off your body and taste the sweet nectar of your skin...when I make ye slick with need... We’re going to be alone. Just the two of us, love. And you’re going to be sobbing my name by the end of it.”

It was a small miracle Felicity’s knees did not buckle then and there. “M-Mr. Spencer—”

“Lady Ashburn? Lady Ashburn, is that you? It is!” A woman’s high-pitched squeal had Felicity jumping away from Felix as though he’d suddenly caught fire. Pressing a hand over her racing heart and plastering a smile on her face, she turned to find Lady Eleanor Manheim, or Ellie as she was commonly known to her friends, rapidly approaching in a swirl of blue skirts and a haze of expensive French perfume.

Felicity had called her Ellie once, but now she greeted the brunette with a wary nod. “Lady Manheim. How nice to see you.”

Like the rest of her so-called friends (with the exception of Scarlett), Eleanor had given her the cut direct after the divorce. A slender woman with dark hair and a catty penchant for gossip, she had her

thumb pressed firmly on the pulse of high society. She knew everything about everyone. Every salacious rumor. Every whisper of scandal. Every lurid affair. She gained her knowledge by whatever means necessary and then tucked it away like an ambitious squirrel storing nuts for the long winter ahead.

“I heard you had returned to town,” Eleanor trilled. “But I did not believe it until I saw you. Why, I was standing right over there and I turned my head and there you were! And I said to myself that cannot *possibly* be Lady Ashburn, for why would she *ever* return to London? But of course I just *had* to be certain, and lo and behold! Here you are.”

“Here I am,” Felicity said demurely.

“How are those lovely children of yours? Growing quickly, I imagine. What were their names again? They are *right* on the tip of my tongue! Hagrid and Amelia?” She pursed her lips. “No, that’s not it.”

“Henry and Anne.”

“That’s right! Henry and Anne. How very sweet. I often wonder why a father would not want to name his firstborn son after himself, but Henry is such a fine name.”

Felicity smile could have been carved from ice. “Which is why I chose it.”

Had she ever really considered this conniving, malicious woman to be her friend? It felt like a lifetime ago when they’d once sat across the table from one another at a dinner party, or stood together in the corner of a ballroom. She had never stooped to Eleanor’s level of pettiness, but hadn’t she stood silently by while Eleanor cut more than

one rival to the quick? *As long as it was not me*, she thought as the bitter taste of shame flooded her mouth.

Well, no more.

Even if by some miracle she was welcomed back into the exclusive world that she'd been so ruthlessly cut out of she wouldn't want to go. Not when she'd peeled back the curtain and caught a glimpse of what the *ton* was really like beneath its glittering surface.

"And who might this be?" Eleanor's crafty gaze flicked to Felix as her eyebrows, thinly plucked and tinted with powder, arched towards the brim of her feather-tipped hat. "A new beau?" Her tinkling laugh set Felicity's teeth on edge. "Why, you little minx you!"

"Lady Manheim, this is Mr. Spencer. Mr. Spencer, Lady Manheim." Although Felicity managed to keep her smile in place, she had a *very* bad feeling in the pit of her stomach. Eleanor may have looked sweet and harmless to the untrained eye, but in reality she was more dangerous and deadly than a viper. Having seen firsthand what could happen when she sank her fangs into something – or someone – Felicity did not want her within twenty yards of Felix, let alone speaking to him directly.

"Mr. Spencer." Dipping into a curtsy, Eleanor batted her lashes with such vigor that Felicity wondered if she did not have something stuck in her eye. "What a pleasure to meet you. Are you new to town?"

Watching Eleanor as one might a spider crawling up the wall, Felix slipped his hands into the pockets of his trousers and rocked back onto his heels. "I've lived here all my life."

"Have you? What a wonder our paths haven't crossed before. How

long have you known our darling Lady Ashburn? It is still Lady Ashburn, isn't it? I must admit I am not certain what social protocol dictates. It's such a rare circumstance, isn't it? *Divorce*," she said in an exaggerated whisper. "I hardly dare to speak the word. You poor thing. What you must have had to endure! I can see it has taken its toll."

"Yes, well, I must admit I find it preferable to be divorced than to share my husband's attentions with another woman. How is Lord Manheim, by the by? Staying busy, I presume?" Felicity may not have had fangs like Eleanor, but she still knew how to draw blood when the occasion demanded it.

Eleanor's eyes narrowed. She was not a woman who liked being put in her place, especially by someone who had no place. "My husband is quite well, thank you for your concern. This has been a splendid visit, but I really must be on my way. We should meet for tea sometime, darling. Catch up on old times."

"Not too soon I hope. With the Season at full tilt I know how busy you must be."

"Heavens, busy does not even begin to cover it! Flitting from one ball to the next is really quite draining. How lucky you are, Lady Ashburn, that you have no engagements to attend."

"Yes." Felicity clucked her tongue in mocking sympathy as she ran her gaze from the top of Eleanor's hat to the polished tips of her leather shoes. "I can see that you are exhausted. But I am sure that with a little bit of rest you shall manage to recover in no time."

"My, my," Eleanor said softly. "The little kitten has finally found

her claws.”

“And this little kitten is not afraid to use them. Good day, Lady Manheim. It was so wonderful to see you again. Do give your husband my best. If he is not too busy with his mistress, that is.”

Eleanor’s mouth opened. Closed. On an incredulous huff of breath she snatched up her skirts and stormed off, leaving a nauseatingly sweet trail of perfume in her wake.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE WOMAN WAS A MARVEL. An absolute marvel.

While Felix would have preferred to tell Lady Manheim exactly where to shove her hoity opinions, Felicity had managed to put the vicious bitch in her place without so much as batting an eye. It'd taken all of his self-restraint not to jump in – especially after Lady Manheim brought Henry into it – but he'd kept his silence because he knew Felicity was not the sort of woman who wanted, or apparently needed, a man to fight her battles for her.

“That was bloody entertaining.” Grinning ear to ear, he wrapped his arm around Felicity's waist and pulled her snug against her side as they walked through the middle of Wayfair Square, an eclectic jumble of old London and new where shopkeepers sold various wares out of carts and tents. When Felicity squirmed in protest he merely kissed her cheek and tightened his grip. “Did ye see her face when ye dangled her husband's lady piece right in front of ‘er? White as a ghost on All-Hollow's Eve.”

“Mr. Spencer, please let me go. There are people watching!”

“Hang ‘em,” he said cheerfully, but he did loosen his arm enough for her to slip free. She tugged discreetly at her bodice to straighten it before she glanced up at him. Biting back a grin, she tucked her hand

in the crook of his elbow.

“She was rather angry, wasn’t she?”

“Furious.”

“I used to be her friend, you know. We attended all the same social functions. Knew all the same people. I was never cruel like she was. Like she still is.” A shadow fell across her countenance. “At least I never thought I was. But isn’t there cruelty in standing by and doing nothing while the strong prey on the weak? I should have done something. I should have stood up to her.”

“Ye stood up to her in the gardens,” he pointed out. “I watched ye do it.”

“Yes, I suppose.” But she did not sound very convinced.

Given that he could count on one hand the number of times she’d shown him any true vulnerability, Felix did not take her tender feelings for granted. Felicity may have been delicate in build but she was strong at heart. The strongest woman he had ever met. If she was willingly admitting a weakness then perhaps it meant she was finally starting to open up to him. To trust him. To show him a part of herself that she hid from the rest of the world.

“Everyone has done things they’re not proud of.” Guiding her around the edge of a trolley cart weighed down with baskets, he stopped the vendor from approaching with a steely-eyed glare that had the portly man hastily backtracking. “The devil knows I’m more guilty than most.”

“Because you are a thief?”

Cheeky woman.

“Was, love,” he corrected. “I *was* a thief. Or as I prefer to call it–”

“A connoisseur of fine things.” Her mouth curved “Yes, I remember.”

A warmth filled him at the sight of her smile. He liked nothing better than to see those beautiful lips bend with happiness. To his mind she did not smile nearly often enough. If she was his – *when she was his*, he corrected silently – he would give her a reason to smile every day, every hour, every minute. He’d wake up to the ringing sound of her laughter in the morning and fall asleep to it at night. There would not be a moment that went by when she did not feel loved and cherished beyond reason. If he did not know for a fact that it would send her running for the hills, he’d tell her as much right to her face. But while she may have been strong, she was also easily spooked and needed to be handled with care and finesse instead of brute force.

It reminded him of a story his mother had told him when he was a boy. A magical story about a young man, and a kingdom, and a sword stuck in a giant rock.

For years and years men full grown tried with all their might to yank the sword free, but the harder they pulled the deeper the sword embedded itself into the stone. Then along came a lad, spindly in build and innocent in heart, who instead of trying to pull out the sword by force decided to coax it free by revealing his true intentions. Not to control the sword or use it for violence, but to have it at his side as an equal to bring about peace.

Now, Felix knew he was no more a spindly lad with an innocent

heart than Felicity was a sword stuck in an old rock, but there were still parallels to be found. If he wanted her love, he could not take it by force. She needed to give it freely, without threat or coercion. Only then would he have what he desired most: not jewels or gold or shiny baubles to slip into his pocket, but the heart of the woman he loved. It was the one – the *only* thing – his nimble fingers could not steal.

“What can I say?” He flashed her a devilish grin. “No one’s perfect. Not even me.”

“You are not perfect?” Her tip-tilted eyes widened in feigned surprise. “I find that *very* hard to believe, Mr. Spencer.”

“Aye, I know,” he said gravely. “But it’s the truth. I’ve my faults, same as any other man. Or woman for that matter. We’re human, love. We make mistakes. It’s what we do. But what we learn from those mistakes...well, to my mind that’s what matters.”

“Yes,” she said after a thoughtful pause. “Yes, I suppose you are right.”

They continued through the busy square, lingering at any cart that happened to catch Felicity’s eye. When Felix saw her gazing longingly at a green silk scarf he tried to purchase it, but she gently stilled his hand when he reached into his pocket for a few shillings.

“No. It is a lovely gesture, but one I could not possibly accept.”

“It’s a scarf.” A bit insulted, he withdrew his hand from his pocket and crossed his arms over his chest. “Not a bloody ruby. It won’t bankrupt me, love.”

“I know that.” Yet her mouth settled in a mulish frown all the same. “But I do not want you to spend your hard-earned money on me. It is

something I want. Not something I need.”

“Aye, I know.” Exasperated, he picked up the scarf and waved it in the air. “Which is why I *want* to buy it for ye. Devil take it woman, can ye make nothing simple?”

How was he supposed to woo her, to charm her, to bloody well *court* her if she put up a wall every time he tried to do something kind? Felix may not have known a lot about courting a lady – the woman in his past hadn’t needed much in the way of courtship aside from a few heated glances and a slap on the arse before they’d jumped in his bed – but he did know it involved long walks and purchasing pretty trinkets. Having done the first (which he’d found surprisingly enjoyable), he was keen to do the second. So why the hell couldn’t she just let him? He’d known love wasn’t easy – one of the reasons he had always avoided it like the plague – but damned if he’d known it was going to be this bloody frustrating.

“Please put the scarf down, Mr. Spencer.”

“Or what?” he challenged.

“Or you are going to ruin what has otherwise been a splendid outing.”

“Because I want to buy ye a gift?” he said incredulously.

“When I wish to buy myself something frivolous I will do so. Until that time comes, I do not need you – or any man – to purchase it for me.” She folded her arms and lifted her pert little chin, violet eyes filled with a gleam of stubbornness he recognized all too well. “I can provide for myself, Mr. Spencer.”

“I never said ye couldn’t.” *But Ashburn had*, Felix realized as his

anger gave way to understanding. Perhaps not in so many words, but Felicity's husband had shown through his callous actions that every dress she'd owned, every piece of jewelry she'd worn, every bloody chair she'd sat in – none of it had ever been *hers*. Not really. Because when it mattered, when it counted the most, she had been thrown to the wolves with little more than the clothes on her back.

And even those hadn't belonged to her.

Created by men of power to give themselves more power, the laws of marriage dictated that anything a woman owned became the property of her husband the moment the vows were read. If she were lucky and her husband generous, she might be given some pin money, but everything she purchased, from hair ribbons to hats, was the legal property of the man she'd married. In the eyes of the law, a wife was a possession instead of a person, with no more rights than a horse. And by all indications Ashburn had been a cruel master.

"I am not him," Felix said gruffly. "When I give ye a gift I won't be askin' for it back."

"To whom are you not comparing yourself, Mr. Spencer?" Any traces of vulnerability were gone, replaced with the thin veneer of indifference Felicity used when she wanted to shield her emotions. She knew precisely 'to whom he was not comparing himself' but she was telling him, without telling him, that she did not care to discuss it.

Well bollocks on that, Felix thought. He was going to buy her the scarf whether she wanted him to or not, and then they were going to put Ashburn to rest once and for all because he'd be damned if she

looked at him and saw that bastard's face instead.

Couldn't she see he was different? Didn't she know he would never take advantage of her? Hurting her would be the same as hurting himself.

"Ye know exactly who I am talking about. That spineless slug you had the misfortune of calling a husband."

Felicity immediately stiffened and withdrew, just as he suspected she would which was why he had neatly positioned her between the table and his own body. When she tried to brush past him he closed his fingers around her slender wrist in a loose manacle that was ready to tighten if necessary.

She stopped and glared up at him, her flashing eyes reminding him of the amethyst necklace he'd nabbed from the Countess of Swarthmore. It had glittered in his hands when he'd held it up to the moonlight, warm pulsing heat trapped between icy cold diamonds.

"Mr. Spencer, this is neither the time nor the place," she said tersely.

"It wasn't the right place at your flat. It wasn't the right time at the park." He scratched his jaw. "Tell me love, just when *is* the right time and the right place to tell ye that I'm not Ashburn?"

Her lips parted, although whether they did so in surprise or anger he couldn't be certain. "I – I *know* that you are not him. You are nothing like him. That is why I–"

"Ye what?" he pressed when she fell silent. "Ye what, Felicity? Tell me."

"I cannot. Not yet." Her long, shapely fingers curled inwards,

forming a fist. “I am not ready yet. I thought I was. I thought – but no. No.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When her lashes flickered and she looked up at him her gaze was clear, sharp, and focused.

And sad, Felix noted as he felt a hollow pang inside of his chest, like a spoon being beaten against an empty barrel. *She still has the saddest eyes I’ve ever seen.*

What was it going to take to fill those eyes with love and light and laughter? To have her look at him with joy instead of trepidation? To embrace the future instead of constantly fearing the past? He knew she’d been hurt. He knew she was still hiding secrets from him. He’d seen the pain in her eyes. Pain that had not come from a broken marriage, but something deeper. Something darker. If he could have picked up a sword and slayed all of her demons he would have done so without hesitation, but he wasn’t a knight, and Felicity wasn’t a princess, and there were some demons that could only be slayed from within.

“My focus needs to be on my children,” she said matter-of-factly. “Not on impractical romantic pursuits. Perhaps in a few months, or a year–”

“If ye think I’m going to wait for a bloody year then ye are sorely mistaken.” Time may have healed wounds, but it wasn’t going to take away her hurt. Left to her own devices she’d spend so long figuring out the correct path to take that she’d grow roots and plant herself right where she was.

Time? The lass didn’t need more *time*. She needed to confront her

past and then she needed to be swept off her feet and carried away before that logical mind of hers knew what was happening.

He was ready to do his part. Had been ready from the first moment he'd tasted her lips, truth be told. But he could carry her across the bloody ocean and every step he took would be worthless unless she came to terms with what haunted her.

"I see." A quiver of disappointment found its way into her voice. "Well of course I could not expect, or ask, you to wait for me. That would be absurd."

Felix released her wrist to run his hands through his hair. He pulled at the ends, grinding his teeth as he struggled to rein in his frustration. "Do ye have to try to be vexing or is it a natural talent ye were born with?"

"I—"

"If I had to I would wait a hundred years for ye," he said, effectively rendering her speechless. "Then I would wait a hundred more. But I'm not going to have to. Ye are going to come to me, love. Sooner rather than later. And when ye do I'll be waiting."

She studied him beneath a swell of dark lashes, her tip-tilted eyes as serious as he'd ever seen them. "I cannot promise you anything, Mr. Spencer."

He brushed his hand across her cheek, thumb lingering on the delicate curve of her jaw. Had he ever felt anything softer than her skin? "I don't need promises. I just need ye."

"And if you had me?" she whispered. "What then?"

He met her gaze unflinchingly. "I would never let ye go."

I would never let you go.

Felix's words still echoed in Felicity's head five nights later as she struggled to sleep. On either side of her Henry and Anne were deep into their dreams, little chests rising and falling in rhythm with their soft snores. Three hours had passed since they'd tumbled blissfully into slumber and yet she was still wide awake, cursed with a racing mind and a bewildered heart.

It had been nearly a week since Felix had taken her to the gardens. Nearly a week since she realized she was falling in love with him. Nearly a week since she let her past fears and doubts cast a dark shadow over her present. Yet despite her time apart from Felix – or more likely because of it – she could not stop thinking about him.

During the day her children were a welcome distraction. Heaven knew they kept her so busy she would hardly think straight. But at night, at night when she stared up at the ceiling, Felix was the only face she saw when she tried to close her eyes. He was the only voice she heard. And he was the only one she yearned for. In the quiet darkness, with Henry and Anne fast asleep, she yearned for Felix with her whole mind, body, and soul.

I would wait a hundred years for ye.

He'd stolen her breath with those eight little words. But had he been speaking the truth? She had no reason to believe him...but he had also not given her a reason to doubt him. At least not yet. But didn't she know better than anyone how deceptive men could be? How they took, and took, and took, never giving anything in return.

Ezra had taken her home.

Her reputation.

Her dignity.

And Rodger...

Rodger had taken her body.

Coldly.

Mercilessly.

Without a single concern for anything but his own pleasure.

When a cold chill worked its way down her spine she gently untangled herself from her children's heavy limbs and padded silently out of the bedroom, careful to leave the door open a crack so if Henry or Anne woke they would not have to wonder where she had gone. Then, gathering a shawl around her shoulders, she went to the window and perched on the edge of the sill to stare broodingly out into the night.

Nary a single cat stirred in the inky darkness. Nor a person for that matter. After a certain hour anyone not looking for trouble locked their doors, dimmed their candles, and remained tucked away until dawn. But while outside the flat everything was still and quiet, inside of it Felicity's mind had never been busier or her thoughts louder.

She wanted to believe Felix was different. She wanted to give herself permission to love him. She even thought she had, until he'd tried to buy that damned silk scarf and all of her old doubts and insecurities had come rushing back to the surface. And she'd remembered her promise to never put herself in a position where she could have everything taken away from her ever again. Yet if she gave

herself to Felix, if she allowed herself to love him, that was precisely what she would be doing.

As his mistress she would be at his beck and call, relying on his money and his generosity to sustain her. As his wife she would be little more than chattel. Either way, if he changed his mind – if he decided he no longer wanted her, or another woman pleased him more – she’d find herself cast aside with nothing to show for her pain but another broken heart.

Wasn’t it better, then, to remain alone? Of course being alone meant being lonely, but at least nothing could be taken from her. Not the flat she was desperately trying to turn into a home, or the meager possessions she’d managed to steal out from under Ezra’s nose, or her poor beleaguered heart. Her fingers tightened in the scratchy folds of her shawl, drawing it more closely around her shoulders as if it might somehow offer protection against her troubled thoughts.

Her heart would be safe if she was alone. Her heart could not break if she was alone.

I would never let ye go.

“But you might,” she whispered softly, her warm breath fogging the glass as she stared blindly out into the darkness. “You might and if you did I don’t know how I would survive it.”

She wanted Felix. She could no longer deny her own feelings, nor the strange, wonderful, frightening attraction they both shared. But she wanted him with the certainty that he would never hurt her.

Unfortunately, love did not come with a guarantee.

On a sigh of bitter confusion she began to draw her leg up against

her chest, only to have it hit the floor with a hard stinging slap when a woman's scream suddenly tore through the night.

Eyes wide, cheeks pale, Felicity jumped down from the sill and ran to the bedroom. The children were still sound asleep, blissfully unaware of the horrible bloodcurdling screech that had raised every hair on the nape of their mother's neck.

It was nothing, she tried to tell herself as she stood by the fireplace wringing her hands. *Nothing but a cat.*

Except it hadn't sounded like any cat she'd ever heard before.

Just to be careful, just to be safe, she reached for the tin box she kept on top of the mantle and took out the knife she'd hidden inside. It was the same one she'd tried to use on Felix, and even though it was small, the sheer weight of it in her hand gave her the courage to walk to the door and press her ear against the grainy wood.

The goose pimples dotting her arms began to recede when the only thing she heard was the erratic pounding of her own heartbeat. Perhaps her overwrought emotions had made her imagine something that wasn't there. Yes. Surely that was it. But just as she started to turn away another terrified scream tore through the night, even louder and closer than before, and this time there was no mistaking it for a cat.

"Help!" Fists beat against the door, rattling it on its hinges.

Felicity jumped back, her heart leaping into her throat as she muffled her own scream with the palm of her hand.

"Someone! 'E's goin' to kill me! For the love of – no. Git away. Git away, I said!"

“It is time to stop running, whore, and face your fate.” A man’s voice. Cold. Empty. Merciless. “Do not worry, I will make it quick. Which is more than you deserve.”

Stop! Felicity wanted to cry. *Stop! Get away from her!* But the words were frozen in her throat, just as they had been seven years ago. Every muscle felt locked in place. She couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t speak. The only thing she could do was listen. Listen as the woman begged for her life. Listen as the man laughed. Listen to the wet gurgle of a knife slicing through flesh, and the hard thud of a body hitting the ground.

Then the only thing to listen to was the silence.

Heavy, oppressive silence.

The sort of silence that came from the dead.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WITH THE KNIFE CLUTCHED tightly in her sweaty palm and her pulse roaring in her ears, Felicity waited for what felt like a small eternity before she dared open the door just wide enough to peer outside.

At first glance everything looked as it always did.

And then she saw the blood.

It was everywhere. Dripping off the petals of the daffodil she had been so carefully tending. Sprayed across the brick. Pooled in the cracks between the cobblestones. And covering the woman who was sprawled on her back in the middle of the alley, like a broken doll that had been played with and then tossed carelessly aside.

Her skirts were twisted around her waist. Her right shoe was missing. Her stocking torn. And Felicity knew, she knew before she even walked over, that the woman wasn't breathing.

How could she? How could she breathe when her throat had been sliced from one ear to the other?

The doorknob slipped from her numb fingers and swung outward, leaving her standing in the doorway in her shawl and nightdress, face drained of all color, violet eyes glassy with shock and horror. On legs

that did not feel as though they belonged to her she walked forward, her shawl slithering off her shoulders and trailing on the ground as she fell to her knees beside the woman.

No.

Not a woman.

Beneath a tangled swath of light brown curls was the face of a young girl. She had too much rouge on her cheeks and there were dark smears of kohl under her eyes, but she could not have been more than fifteen years. Sixteen at the most.

A *child*, Felicity thought as she gently smoothed the girl's hair away from her blank, unstarling eyes with a hand that wasn't quite steady. *The poor thing is only a child.*

What sort of monster had done this?

And where had they gone?

Her breath caught in her throat as she realized the murderer could be watching her even now. Hiding in the shadows. Waiting to strike. The knife he'd used to slice his first victim's throat still clutched in his hand, blood dripping off the tip of the blade.

On a soft cry she lurched to her feet. Through a sheen of tears she ran back to the door, stumbled inside, and locked it behind her. For a moment she stood frozen, her breath coming in hard, fast little bursts that caused her lungs to burn and her entire body to shake.

She'd never seen such violence before. She'd never imagined such cruel, senseless violence was even possible. For the girl had not just been killed, which would have been horrible enough. She had been – she had been *maimed*. Her throat... Reflexively Felicity lifted a hand to

her own neck, smearing blood across her pale skin.

The children.

She needed to protect the children.

A mother's driving instinct to guard and defend that which was most precious had her swallowing the fear that threatened to overwhelm. She dashed into the bedroom, readying the children's shoes and hats before she went to the bed and gently roused them.

"Darlings," she whispered, stroking their soft heads. "Darlings, you need to wake up now."

Henry stirred first. "Mama," he said, his green eyes unfocused and heavy with sleep. "Mama, why's it so dark?" Confused, he rolled onto his belly and started to drift back into slumber, his face cushioned in the crook of his arm.

"Because the sun has not come up yet. Henry. *Henry*," she said firmly. "Something has happened. We have to leave. Be a good boy and put on your shoes." He started to protest when she pulled him from the warm confines of the bed, but she quelled his resistance with a stern frown. "Henry Ezra Joseph. Put on your shoes. *Now*."

"Yes Mama," he mumbled.

While Henry did as he was told, she scooped Anne up, blankets and all. Her daughter began to stir, but then on a long, dreamy sigh she promptly fell back asleep, head lolling on Felicity's shoulder.

Shifting Anne to her right arm, she knelt and helped Henry finish buckling his shoes with her left before putting on his hat. "Hold my hand and do not let go. We are going to walk very quickly and I need you to keep up, no matter what. You must keep up, Henry. Do you

understand?”

The urgency in her tone brought a flicker of alarm to Henry’s countenance. “Mama, Mama I don’t want to leave.”

Still crouching, she cupped his chin and looked him squarely in the eye. “It is no longer safe here, darling.” As the gruesome image of the girl’s sliced throat flashed through her mind she fought back a shudder. “When we go outside I want you to close your eyes tight. Close your eyes tight and do not let go of my hand. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

“That’s my brave boy.” She ruffled his hair, as if it were any other ordinary day. As if there wasn’t a dead woman laying on their doorstep. As if the cobblestones weren’t slick with blood. As if a monster wasn’t hiding in the shadows.

For an instant she considered staying put. Bracing a chair under the doorknob and hiding beneath the bed. But surely it was better to run than to cower and hope the murderer would not return. For if he did...if he did there would be nowhere they could hide. Holding Anne against her chest, she took Henry’s little hand and murmured a quick prayer. “Close your eyes,” she reminded him. “And do not open them until I tell you to.”

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“Bow Street. We are going to Bow Street.”

BLOODY UNCOMFORTABLE COT. Thumping his fist against the thin mattress in frustration, Felix sat up and swung his legs over the side. He hated sleeping at Headquarters. Mostly because he never slept. But

at least one Runner always needed to be available in case someone came knocking in the wee hours of the morning, and tonight it was his turn to man the post.

On the other side of the small room Ian Ferguson was snoring. Loudly.

“Put a cork in it ye bugger.” Picking up his pillow, Felix launched it with no small amount of force at Ian. It struck him square on the back of his noggin. Coming awake with a snort, he propped himself up on his side and glared across the room.

“Watch yourself, Spencer.”

“Or what?” Felix sneered. “Don’t pretend ye are going to come over here and do anything about it.” He knew he was being a right bastard, but he couldn’t help himself. A dark cloud had formed over his head since he and Felicity last parted and every day that went by without a word from her it grew heavier and darker and more volatile.

Each morning he fought a battle to stay away from her and every night as he laid alone in bed with only his thoughts to keep him company he damned his stubborn pride to hell and back again.

He was in love with Felicity. He did not know when it had happened, or even why, but he was in love with her. And even though she refused to say it, mule headed woman that she was, he knew she loved him as well. Which was why her hesitation did not make sense. Why the flash of fear he saw reflected in her gaze when she thought he wasn’t looking did not make sense.

Felix knew what it was like to lose everything. The shame of it, and the helplessness. But one thing he’d never felt, one thing loss had

never brought him, was fear. Which was how he knew Felicity was hiding something from him. Something greater than what Ashburn had done. Something that had hurt her worse than the divorce. Something that always made her draw back just as she was about to rush forward. Something that was keeping her from giving him her heart.

Restless, angry, confused, he stood up and dragged a shirt over his head.

“Where are you going?” Fully awake now, Ian scrubbed his hands down his face as he rose to his feet. A by the books fellow if ever there was one, he kept his jaw cleanly shaven and his blond hair neatly trimmed. Both taller and slightly leaner than his twin brother, he had chiseled features that would have been perfectly symmetrical if not for his nose. Courtesy of a wayward fist during a scuffle with two drunks, it slanted slightly to the left.

“Downstairs.” Although he could have easily walked through the house blindfolded, Felix lit a small oil lamp and carried it with him out of the room. The stairs creaked as he descended the narrow staircase, his shadow rippling across faded wallpaper and the stern-faced portraits of Henry and John Fielding.

Leaving the lamp on a small table by the front door, he went into the kitchen to rummage for a quick morsel but after searching through the cupboards and the pantry the only thing he managed to find was a single red apple. Biting into it, he wandered back through the foyer and into the drawing room where Ian was waiting for him, having taken the time to formally dress himself in trousers, a waistcoat, and

an impeccably folded cravat. Felix lifted a brow.

“Is there a ball I haven’t been invited to, or are ye dressed like a pompous dandy just for the thrill of it?”

“Sod off, Spencer.” Walking around the room, Ian lit the tallow candles tucked away inside mirrored sconces before he sat at the end of the large, cluttered table where they conducted their meetings. Light flickered across stacks of papers and wooden crates filled with an odd assortment of items, everything from a letter opener that had been used to stab a banker to a fluffy ostrich feather that belonged to the mistress of an ambassador suspected of murder.

“Why don’t ye jest go back to bed?” Irritated that he wouldn’t be left to brood alone, Felix crossed to one of the windows overlooking the street and drew back the heavy curtain.

“And spend another night listening to you pace a hole in the floor? I think not. What’s gotten under your skin, Spencer? I do not think you have slept in three nights.”

Felix glanced back over his shoulder and bared his teeth in a humorless smile. “Four.”

“Guilt for all your past crimes finally catching up to you, is it?” Ian did not like the fact that Felix was a Runner any more than Hargrave did. “Or is it a woman that’s giving you trouble?”

“What do you know about women?” Felix said with a snort. Given how dedicated he was to being a Runner, it wouldn’t have surprised Felix in the least to learn Ian was still a virgin. The man ate, slept, and breathed Bow Street. It was his lover, his mistress, and his wife all rolled into one.

“I’m married to one, aren’t I?”

“The devil you are,” Felix said incredulously as he turned back around. Ian Ferguson? *Married*? Preposterous. Owen was the only one among them that had taken the plunge. There were bets on who would be next – Hargrave was the odds on favorite, given who his father was – but Ian was about as far down on the list as one could possibly get. Come to think of it, Felix couldn’t recall if he had even made the list at all.

“We were wed three years ago. Before I became a Runner.”

“How much did ye have to pay the poor wench?”

“Pay *her*?” Ian shook his head. “She should have paid *me*. Elizabeth fancies herself a *bluestocking*.” He spoke the word as though it were a curse, which for him it might as well have been.

Bluestockings had their place. Felix had even fancied one himself a time or two. But in his experience they were high strung, independent creatures who had little patience for social rules and customs. The sort of rules and customs a man like Ian regarded as law.

“Why the hell did ye go and marry one of those?” he wondered out loud. Ian may have been about as engaging as a piece of pocket lint, but he was also well-spoken, intelligent, and passably handsome. He could have had his pick of any number of women, and yet he’d chosen the *one* lass who was almost certain to bring him strife? It didn’t make a damn bit of sense. But then love rarely did. Wasn’t he learning that firsthand with Felicity? Stand the two of them side by side and they couldn’t have been more different.

He had been raised on the streets. She had been raised in a bloody

mansion. He was a commoner. She was a lady. He was impulsive. She was reserved. She was a mother twice over and he'd never given having children a passing thought. Except for the first three letters of their names they were complete opposites in nearly every way, and yet he'd fallen for her so hard and so bloody fast his head was still spinning.

"Why did I marry her...?" Ian's voice trailed away, his expression contemplative as he thought it over. Then he shrugged. "Because I was young and reckless."

Picturing Ian Ferguson young and reckless was like imagining a cow sprouting wings and taking flight. In short, it was impossible. While Ian may have technically been young in years – twenty-five of them, to be exact – he was the least reckless man Felix had ever met. If Owen wanted a three page report Ian wrote four pages, just to be safe. He was perpetually early. He never missed a day of work. He always did everything by the book. Hell, he might as well have written the book himself. And he was married to a bluestocking no one even knew existed.

"How did ye know she was the–"

"There is someone at the door," Ian interrupted. "A woman and one" – he leaned forward and squinted past Felix out the window – "no, make that two small children."

"At this hour? It's almost three in the morning." Felix took another bite of his apple before he set it down on the sill. "Best go see what they're about. Start some tea, would ye? And see if ye can scrounge up something more than fruit. Chances are they're going to be hungry."

Ian's chair scraped loudly against the floor as he shoved away from the table. "I'm not your lapdog, Spencer. Get it yourself."

Felix grinned. If that was one thing guaranteed to put him in a chipper mood – aside from finally getting Felicity in his bed – it was antagonizing his fellow Runners. "Go home to your wife then. I can handle a hen and her chicks easy enough. There's no need for ye to be here."

"I'll get the tea," Ian grumbled.

"Good boy," Felix said with a chuckle. He was still chuckling when he went into the foyer. But his laughter came to an abrupt end when he unlocked the door and saw who awaited him on the other side of it.

"Felicity." He caught her as she stumbled towards him. The whites of her eyes flashed with terror before she buried her head against his chest and let out a muffled sob. "Felicity, what the devil—" He cut himself short. He could question her when she wasn't shaking like a leaf. For now, she only needed one thing. To know that she was safe. "Come on love, in we go." Picking up the oil lamp he'd left by the door, he led Felicity and her children straight up the stairs to the Captain's private quarters. When Henry struggled to keep up he simply threw the lad onto his shoulders, but when he went to pull Anne from Felicity's arms she shook her head.

"I've got her," she said softly. "Where are you taking us?"

"Somewhere the children can rest and ye can tell me what happened." Even though Owen had moved out three weeks ago, the third floor was still sparsely furnished with a bed in one room and a

sofa, chairs, and table in the other.

Lighting another oil lamp, Felix set it down on top of an empty dresser so Felicity could see while she tucked the little ones into bed. Anne did not so much as stir an eyelash, but Henry sat up on his elbows and peered around.

“Where are we? Mum, I want to go home. I don’t like it here.”

His small, plaintive voice tugged straight at Felix’s heart as he watched and listened from the doorway. Henry and Anne may not have been his by blood, but Cornelius Spencer was evidence of the fact that breeding made a sire out of a man, not a father. A father was something more.

A father was there to kiss bruises and bumps. A father was there to teach his son – and his daughter – how to fish and ride and sail a pond yacht straight and true. A father was there to sweep the children’s mother off her feet and show them that love was not cold and sterile but warm and welcoming. A father was there to raise his children. To teach them. To protect them. And if Felicity let him, he would be that father to Henry and Anne.

“I know, darling. I know.” Metal springs squeaked as Felicity sat down on the edge of the mattress. “You did such a good job holding my hand. You were such a brave, courageous boy.” Leaning forward, she kissed his brow. “I’m so very proud of you, Henry. But I want you to rest now, all right? Close your eyes and rest. When you wake up in the morning Mr. Spencer will take you for a tour. Won’t you, Mr. Spencer?” She lifted her head, revealing eyes heavy with exhaustion.

“Aye,” Felix said without hesitation. “And do ye know whose bed it

is you're sleeping in, lad?"

"No," Henry whispered.

"The Captain's himself. I suppose that makes you an honorary Runner. Best get to sleep. A Runner needs his wits about him. We'll start our work bright and early. Goodnight, lad." Felix stepped back and partially closed the door, a smile creasing his face when he heard Henry's excited chatter and Felicity's calm, quiet insistence that he go straight to bed so he could help Mr. Spencer solve a case in the morning.

After a few minutes all was silent and still. He waited for Felicity in the hall. When she stepped out from behind the door she gasped at the sight of him and pressed a hand over her chest, her face as white as the sheets she'd just tucked her children into.

"It's just me, love. No need to be alarmed." Felix spoke in the same soft, easy monotone he'd used to calm a frightened horse which had gotten tangled in its harness. "Let's go sit down and get some tea into ye. Are ye hungry?"

Her gaze darted back to the bedroom. "I cannot leave Henry and Anne."

"There's no safer place for them in all the world than right where they are." He cupped the back of his neck and squeezed the corded muscles tight. It was hard for him to see Felicity so afraid. Harder still because he didn't yet know the source of her fear. Or why the devil she'd gone running through the streets at night in nothing more than a flimsy wrap and her nightdress. Bloody 'ell, the poor dove didn't even have any shoes on. "I'll be right back."

“Wait.” She reached for his arm, nails digging into his skin as she wrapped her fingers around his wrist in a surprisingly strong grip. “Don’t leave me.”

He gathered her close. Pressed his lips to her temple. “I’m going downstairs to get ye some tea, love, and a warm blanket. I’ll be but a minute.”

“The children are safe? No one can get them?”

“They’re safe. No one can get them.”

A shudder ran through her body. “Please be quick. I – I need to tell you what happened. You need to send men. You need to send men to her. She shouldn’t be left there. All alone. She shouldn’t be left.”

“Send men to who, love?” he asked patiently.

“The girl. He cut her throat, Felix. The blood...there was so much of it. He killed her.” Laying her head against his chest, she began to quietly weep. “He killed her right outside my door.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“GET AHOLD OF KENT ANYWAY YE CAN and get him here.” Holding a pot of tea, two cups, and a gray blanket in his arms, Felix stopped at the bottom of the stairs and turned his head to glare at Ian when he realized the other man wasn’t moving. “Did ye bloody ears get boxed or did ye hear what I said? Get moving, man!”

Ian crossed his arms. “My ears *will* get boxed if I wake up Kent at this hour without a good reason. And that’s only if he’s in a good mood. Who was that woman? What does she want? And what the bollocks does she have to do with Kent?”

“It’s not what *she* has to do with Kent,” Felix growled. “It’s what the dead woman on her doorstep has to do with Kent. The Slasher is back.”

It was all the explanation Ian needed. Grim-faced, he grabbed his coat and shoved his arms through the sleeves. “I’ll return with Kent as soon as I can. Do you want me to get the Captain as well?”

“Aye.” Felix closed his eyes for a fraction of a second. “Get everyone.”

FELICITY WAITED FOR FELIX TO RETURN outside the bedroom where her children slept. She could hear the low murmur of masculine voices beneath her feet, and wondered who he was talking to and what he

was telling him. She heard the front door open and close, then the rhythmic pounding of footsteps as someone climbed the stairs. The breath she hadn't even known she was holding expelled in a loud rush of air as Felix rounded the corner.

"It's just me, love," he said in the same reassuring tone he'd been using since she had arrived. "How are the little rascals?"

"Fast asleep." And for that she owed Felix the world. When she'd set out for Bow Street in the dark and the dreary with shadows nipping at her heels she hadn't known he would be the one to answer the door. But she was grateful it had been him. More grateful than she could possibly put into words.

She followed him into the small adjoining parlor and sat down in the middle of a worn camelback settee. Felix wrapped a soft gray blanket around her lap and thrust a warm cup of tea into her hand before he crouched down in front of the fireplace and started a fire.

It wasn't until the room was encased in a warm, merry glow that Felicity realized how cold she'd been. Drawing the blanket up to her chin, she took a long sip of tea. Despite being unsweetened and slightly acidic, it was the best she'd ever tasted.

"Now then." Brushing his hands together, Felix stood up. "Are ye ready to tell me what happened?"

"The girl. She's still lying there, in the alley. Is someone—"

"The other Runners are on their way here. When they arrive the Captain will send someone to your flat." Little licks of orange and yellow light danced across Felix's somber countenance as he walked silently across the room and sat beside her. Not quite touching, but

still close enough to comfort.

He hadn't shaved since she'd last seen him, Felicity noted, and his dark scruff had grown into a beard that enveloped nearly half of his face. The beard made him appear rougher. Surlier. Meaner. But she'd seen with her own eyes the gentle care with which he'd carried Henry up the stairs and the tenderness in his gaze as he'd watched her tuck them into bed.

He was so kind with the children. Certainly kinder than Ezra had ever been. Would he be a good father to them? It was not something she'd thought of before. Perhaps because she already knew the answer.

"If you would rather wait and speak to the Captain directly," Felix began, but Felicity gave a small shake of her head.

"No. No, I want to tell you." She set her cup of tea down on the table and wrapped the blanket more closely around herself, a small bird seeking shelter from a coming storm it had no way to avoid. When she began to speak she was no longer sitting beside Felix, but rather hiding behind her own door, paralyzed by fear and cowardice as a young woman's life was cut brutally short.

"...and I did nothing," she finished on a wretched whisper. "I could have helped her. I could have saved her." Felicity feared that no matter how much time passed she would never be able to get the girl's voice out of her head, just as she would never be able to get the blood out of her clothes.

Help me! For the love of God, someone help me!

When she shuddered Felix drew her cold, trembling hand out from

beneath the blanket and squeezed the blood back into her fingers. "Look at me. Look," he said sternly when she would have stared blindly down at the floor. "The only thing ye would have done if ye had opened that door was get yourself and your children killed. Do ye understand?"

"Yes, but--"

"There was nothing ye could have done." Something flickered in the depths of Felix's tawny gaze. It took Felicity a moment to figure out what it was, and when she did her breath caught in her throat.

Recognition.

It was recognition.

"You know who did this. You know who killed her."

"Aye," he acknowledged. "I know who killed her." Releasing her hand, he stood up and began to pace back and forth across the room, his shoulders as hard and stiff as Felicity had ever seen them. "We call him the Slasher. He's murdered four women that we know of. Five if ye include the girl tonight. His last victim was the wife of a Runner. Marianne Kent." He stopped in front of the fireplace with his legs braced apart and a scowl darkening his brow. "The bastard slit 'er throat when she was on her way home from the market. Left her body in the middle of the street for her husband to find. That was nigh on three years ago. Kent 'as been hunting him every day since, but every lead has come up empty. We've been hoping he's been eight feet under the ground. I guess this proves otherwise."

Felicity leaned back against the settee and drew her legs to her chest. "How do you know it was him? Perhaps – perhaps it was only

someone who wanted to make you *think* it was him.” As if that somehow made it better. As if that somehow made it right.

While it certainly wouldn’t bring the girl back to life, it *would* mean a savage killer wasn’t once again loose on the streets of London. A savage killer who had been mere feet away from her children. She pinched the bridge of her nose as a hard, pulsing knot formed right behind her eyes.

What was she going to *do*? She couldn’t go back there. Not even to collect her things. If she walked over those blood-stained cobblestones again... Her eyes closed as her stomach revolted at the very idea, threatening to churn up the potato stew she’d eaten for dinner.

“Ye need to rest,” Felix said quietly. “You’re safe here, love. Ye have no need to worry.”

Because of you.

Her lashes fluttered open, gaze automatically drawn to the lean, sharp lines of his countenance. He could have turned her away as she had done to him. Could have treated her children with coldness instead of kindness. Could have shoved all three of them back out into the cruel, merciless night. But he hadn’t. Because he wasn’t Ezra. And he wasn’t Rodger. He was Felix. He was *her* Felix. And she was falling helplessly, hopelessly, irrevocably in love with him...whether she wanted to or not.

“I need to thank you, Mr. Spencer.” Her hands twisted together on top of her bent knees, fingers intertwining as her gaze dropped to his chest. It was easier to look there than into those perceptive golden eyes of his. Especially given what she wanted – what she *needed* – to

say. "I was thinking about you before – before that poor woman was killed."

"Were ye," he murmured.

"Yes and I..." *I am falling in love with you but I am afraid. I am afraid of being hurt again. I am afraid of having my heart broken again. Help me to not be afraid, Felix. I know that you can. I know that you are the only one who can.* "I just wanted to thank you for taking us in tonight. You did not have to do that."

Coward, she thought with disgust. You, Felicity Atwood, are a spineless coward.

Felix lifted two fingers to his brow in a mock salute. "That's what we're here for, Miss Atwood. Bow Street Runners, at your service night and day." He scratched at his jaw. "Is there anything else ye wanted to tell me?"

Yes.

"No." Gathering the blanket, she busied herself by folding it into a neat square before setting it aside. "No, that was it."

"Are ye certain?"

He knows, she realized. He knows I am in love with him.

"Yes, Mr. Spencer. I'm certain."

"ARE WE CERTAIN IT'S THE SLASHER?" From his position at the head of the table, Owen commanded the attention of every Runner on Bow Street save Hawke and Colin who had been sent to retrieve what evidence they could from the scene of the crime, including the dead woman's body.

“Aye.” For the first time since he’d been appointed a Runner, Felix sat directly to the Captain’s left in the chair typically reserved for Grant. “Without having been there to see it with me own eyes, I’m as certain as I can be. Everything Felicity said, from the amount of blood to the slashed throat, matches his previous kills. It’s him all right.”

Everyone was silent for a moment as they absorbed the gravity of the situation.

When the Slasher – the only name they had for him as his true identity remained a mystery – claimed his first victim Henry Fielding had still been in charge. It was before Felix’s time, but he’d heard the story enough times to know that at first it was believed to have been a crime of passion. A lover’s quarrel gone wrong. Nothing more, nothing less.

Until the second woman was found, and then the third. When Kent’s wife became the fourth they realized they were not hunting a man, but a monster.

The Slasher murdered without discrimination. All of the women he’d killed had been different ages, different builds, and found in different parts of the city. The only thing they had in common was how they’d been murdered: throats cut wide open and left in the middle of the street in a congealing pool of their own blood.

“The devil must have spat him back out,” Lord Brentwood said quietly.

“And we’re going to send him straight back to hell.” Tobias Kent’s eyes were as dark and fierce as Felix had ever seen them. He was the only one not sitting at the table. Instead he stood by the window,

every muscle in his lean, hard body drawn tight as a bowstring.

“This case takes precedence over everything.” Owen spoke calmly, but there was a clipped edge to his tone Felix had never heard before. “I want every Runner hunting this bastard day and night. We need to find him before he kills again.”

“London is a big place, Captain.” It was the first time Grant had spoken. “And the Slasher hasn’t shown a preference for any one district in particular. The first woman was found outside Berkley Square, this one was killed in the East End. That’s a lot of area to cover.”

“So we cover it.” Kent’s voice lashed across the room like a whip.

“I never said we didn’t, or we couldn’t,” Grant said quietly. “But we want to be clever about it. There is a reason the Slasher hasn’t been caught already. He may be a sadistic bastard, but he’s careful. He knows how to cover his tracks.”

“Hargrave is right. We’ll need to keep our wits about us and have a plan in place.” Owen ran a hand down his face. “Brentwood, take that map down off the wall.”

Brentwood tore down the large map of London without question and spread it out across the table. Standing, Owen used a pencil to cut the map into five triangular sections with the East End as the focal point. “We’ll break up into pairs. Cover as much ground as possible. Question everyone. Someone had to have seen something, or know something. Detain anyone who looks suspicious, male or female.” He lifted his head and looked at each one of his Runners in turn. “Pick a partner you like, because the two of you are going to be spending a lot

of time together over the next few days. I want men canvassing the city round the clock. I'll be damned if I allow another woman to die under my watch. Is that understood?"

Tight-lipped and grim-faced, everyone nodded.

"Good. Then let's get started. Spencer, a word."

Wondering what the devil he'd done now, Felix followed Owen up the stairs and into his private office.

"Shut the door," Owen said brusquely before he sat down at his desk. An overcast, sullen dawn was just beginning to break across the sky and with it came a pattering of rain. "I take it Miss Atwood and the children are still sleeping."

"Aye."

"I imagine finding a dead body was quite a shock."

"Felicity's stronger than she looks."

Owen's icy blue stare was piercing. "Yes. She certainly is. I am going to be blunt, Spencer. For a variety of reasons, but mostly because we do not have the time to be otherwise. What are your intentions towards her? Be honest with me."

Why did it suddenly feel as though he were speaking to a father instead of a captain? Truth be told, Felix didn't know which one he'd rather face.

"I thought ye said ye didn't want to interfere in her personal business," he hedged.

"That was before she showed up here in the middle of the night covered in blood." Owen leaned forward. "Your intentions, Spencer."

To hell with it.

“I intend to marry her.”

Bollocks, he cursed silently. Had he really just spoken those words out loud? He must have looked as confounded as he felt because the corners of Owen’s mouth twitched into something that vaguely resembled a smile.

“I am pleased to hear that. When can we expect the merry nuptials to take place?”

“Devil if I know,” he said sourly. “The woman’s as fickle as the wind and stubborn as a mule. I know she feels the same way about me as I do about her, but she refuses to admit it. One moment she can’t stand the sight of me and the next she’s all but begging to be kissed.”

Owen lifted a brow. “I am going to pretend I did not just hear that.”

“How did ye do it?” Exasperated, Felix went to the window and stared out at the gray, gloomy sky. The rain had increased in intensity and was falling against the glass in great hammering sheets. On the street below people hurried by clutching newspapers and brollies while carriages splashed through great puddles of water. A woman was dead, killed in the street like a dog, but life went on. Life always found a way to go on. “How did ye make your wife fall in love with ye?”

Owen snorted. “You’ve met my wife. No one *makes* Scarlett do anything, least of all me.”

“Well ye must have done something. The two of ye were like cats and dogs. Now I’ve never seen anyone happier.”

“Our courtship was...complicated,” Owen acknowledged after a pause. “But no one ever said love was supposed to be easy.”

“No one ever said it was going to be this bloody hard, either.”

“Felicity has been through more than most.”

Felix braced his arms against the sill. “I know what she’s been through. I know why she’s wary with me. But I would never hurt her. I couldn’t.”

“If I thought otherwise we would not be having this conversation. Give her time, Spencer. It’s not only herself she’s thinking of. She has the children as well. Henry and Anne mean the world to her.”

“They’ve come to mean the same to me.”

“Yes.” Even though Felix was turned away from Owen, he felt the heavy weight of the Captain’s stare on his back all the same. “Yes, I can see that they do. I believe we can both agree that after what happened tonight it is not safe for them to return to the East End.”

“Aye.” Felix rubbed his chin. “Which is why I have a favor to ask ye, Cap’n...”

“I TRULY WISH I could help you, Filly. I do. It’s just...well...as you can see we are undergoing so many renovations.” Feeling like the worst friend in the entire world, Scarlett gestured helplessly at the piles of wood and stone sitting in the middle of her foyer. “It would not be safe for the children. You understand.”

A line of confusion marred Felicity’s brow. “I – I do, but it would only be for a few days. A week or two at the most. Only until I find somewhere else for us to live. You yourself said the house was large enough to accommodate us. We wouldn’t be a bother.”

“I am sorry, darling. It’s just not going to work.”

“I see,” Felicity said stiffly. “Well in that case I am sorry to have bothered you.”

Damnit Owen, Scarlett cursed under her breath as she watched Felicity walk away. *You had better know what you are doing.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FELICITY HAD BEEN SO CERTAIN Scarlett would jump at the opportunity to help her that she hadn't even considered what she would do if her friend refused.

Walking with the careful deliberation of someone trying desperately not to break, she kept her chin lifted and her gaze pointed straight ahead as two women strolled past, their parasols shielding them from the misting rain falling from a cloudy, nondescript sky. They glanced in her direction and she hated that her cheeks heated with shame even though she had nothing to be shameful for.

She had not asked for Rodger to rape her. She had not asked for Ezra to divorce her. She had not asked to be thrown out of her home. She had not asked to stumble across some poor woman with her throat slit ear to ear. She had not asked for *any* of it. And it wasn't right. And it wasn't fair. And if screaming or crying would have made it better than she'd have spent the rest of eternity shouting at the heavens and crying herself sick. But screaming and crying would not do anything other than make her throat sore and her eyes ache, and as she had enough problems to deal with – first and foremost being a distinctive lack of reliable friends – she did neither.

Let people stare. Let them whisper. Soon enough another scandal would take Society by storm and she would become nothing more

than a very small fish in a very large, very dirty pond. Every once in a while someone would reel her in but they'd toss her back soon enough, allowing her to live in relative obscurity beneath the water's murky surface.

Puddles from an early morning downpour covered both the pavement and the street, soaking her leather ankle boots and making her stockings squish as she made her way to Gracechurch Street.

She'd sent Henry and Anne to her mother's at first light. Felix had been gone when they'd awoken, and although Owen had insisted they could remain at Bow Street for as long as they needed, she had not felt comfortable in the presence of so many strangers. Thus the children had gone to their grandmother's and she'd gone to Scarlett's, confident her dearest and oldest friend would be true to her word and offer them a place to stay until she managed to find another flat to rent. Preferably one that was not stained red with blood. But Scarlett, for reasons that bemused, had turned her away...and now, to use one of Felix's favorite words, she didn't know what the devil she was going to do.

Mrs. Atwood's white Pomeranian heralded Felicity's arrival with a series of short, yappy barks. It nipped at her heels as she made her way through the neatly appointed townhouse and into the parlor where her mother was enjoying a cup of tea while the children played with wooden blocks.

"That was a quick visit," Mrs. Atwood noted. "Was Scarlett not in this morning? Mr. Darcy, come here. Come *here*, I said."

With one last growling nip at the back of Felicity's boot, the

Pomeranian trotted across the rug and jumped into his mistress's lap where he curled up like a cat, little black nose burrowing itself in the fluff of his tail.

"Silly thing," Mrs. Atwood said with great affection. "Were you guarding the front door? You are such a good boy, Mr. Darcy."

The teeth marks on Felicity's ankle boots said otherwise, but she did not complain as she knelt down to kiss Henry and Anne on the cheek before she sat beside her mother and poured herself some tea. Slowly stirring in a spoonful of sugar, she considered the best way to approach a rather difficult topic.

She loved her mother dearly, and it was because of that love that she had not burdened Mrs. Atwood with the full extent of her plight. As far as her mother knew she and the children had been living in a cozy two-bedroom flat in the comfortable Hanover Square district. She knew this because it was what Felicity had told her.

The tiny white lie – which really wasn't all that tiny, now that she thought about it – had been for her mother's benefit. While she looked well today, Mrs. Atwood had been plagued with poor health since the death of her husband.

The doctors had given her every treatment imaginable, from vinegar baths to dipping her hair in amber oil, but there was no fixing a broken heart. And even though she managed to summon the strength to watch her grandchildren every once in a while, Felicity feared the toll it would take upon her health if they were all confined to the same house together.

But now that they truly had nowhere else to go and no one else to

turn to, what else could she do but rely upon her mother and admit, even though it pained her greatly to do so, that she could no longer provide for her own children? That she could not give them even the most basic of necessities. That she was a failure as a mother.

Putting down her tea without having taken a single sip, she drew a deep breath. “There is something I must tell—”

“Someone is at the door,” Mrs. Atwood interrupted one second before Mr. Darcy let out a volley of barks and jumped off her lap.

“Are you expecting anyone?” Felicity asked.

“No. Not that I can recall.” Her brow furrowed. “Unless it’s Wednesday. It is my turn to host the Bridgeton Waverly Women’s weekly card game.”

Well that was certainly a mouthful. Felicity was glad the scandal that had ruined her name had left her mother’s good name unscathed. Mrs. Atwood was as active as she’d ever been, flitting from one social event to the next. If not for her health she could have easily passed for a woman half her age, but mourning Felicity’s father had taken its toll in more ways than one. She was at least one stone too thin, with more gray hair than brown and more lines on her face than smooth skin. Powders and creams softened the aging, but it did not stop it. Nothing could, Felicity supposed. In the end time took what it wanted from whom it wanted and there was nothing any of them could do to slow it down.

“We can finally play whist again now that Lady Trembley has returned from holiday,” Mrs. Atwood continued. “Do you know she went all the way to Greece?”

“It is only Tuesday and no, I did not.”

“Well then I haven’t the faintest idea,” said Mrs. Atwood with a bemused shake of her head. “A solicitor, perhaps? They’ve been merciless over the past few days. I’ve told them I have all the silk fans I could possibly need, but do they listen? No. They do not.”

“I will send them on their way.” Rising, Felicity followed the sound of Mr. Darcy’s high-pitched whines into the foyer. The Pomeranian was scratching frantically at the door. When he heard Felicity approaching he flattened his ears and bared his teeth, but she merely nudged him aside with her boot and opened the door. “I am sorry, but Mrs. Atwood does not need any...more...” Her voice trailed away when she saw who was standing in front of her, a bouquet of lavender in each hand and a smirk twisting his mouth. “Mr. Spencer,” she sighed. “I should have known.”

“Miss Atwood.” He bowed forward and brought her hand to his lips. Grazing his mouth across the back of her knuckles, he lifted his head. “You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“You saw me just last night,” she reminded him. But it did warm her heart to think that he’d missed her.

She’d been careful to hide it from the children, but she had been disappointed when they’d woken this morning and he had been nowhere to be seen. Off on a case, Owen had said, and he’d given her the choice to wait, but she’d been too anxious to sit idly by. So Owen’s driver had taken Henry and Anne to their grandmother’s while she’d walked the short distance to Scarlett’s to ask her dearest friend – her *only* friend – a favor.

Fat lot of good it had done her.

“I could see ye every minute of every day and ye would still be a sight. I brought these for ye.” Felix offered her one of the lavender bouquets. Both pleased and flustered by the gesture – she couldn’t remember the last time anyone had brought her flowers – Felicity took the bouquet, but did not step away from the door or invite Felix inside.

“What are you doing here?” She regarded him quizzically, dark brows knitted above the tilted line of her nose. “This is my mother’s house.”

He flashed her a grin. “Aye, I know. Did ye think I’ve been knocking on every door between here and Bow Street lookin’ for ye and finally happened to stumble across the right one?”

“No, of course not. I...I simply was not expecting to see you, especially here of all places. What do you want, Mr. Spencer?” Her throat tightened. “Is it – is it something to do with the events of last night? Has there been another victim?”

“Nothin’ like that,” he assured her. “We’ve no new leads, but every Runner in the city is out looking for the bastard. We’ll have him soon enough. I don’t want ye to concern yourself with it a moment longer.”

Easier said than done, Felicity thought silently. Her fingers tightened around the bouquet. She did not think she would ever get the woman’s screams out of her head, nor erase the sight of all that blood from her memory. But neither could she allow herself to dwell on the grim and the gruesome. God willing, the Slasher would soon be held accountable for his savagery and the women he had killed would

finally be able to find peace, as would their families.

“As for why I’m here,” Felix continued, “I wanted to see ye. As well as bring ye something pretty. Do ye like them? They reminded me of ye. They match your eyes,” he said gruffly.

She brought the lavender to her face. Took a delicate sniff. “They’re beautiful. And they smell heavenly. But surely you did not come all this way just to bring me flowers. Which I should put in water before they start to wilt.” She started to reach for the second bouquet, but to her surprise he lightly slapped her hand away.

“Now don’t be greedy, love. This bunch is for your mother.”

He’d brought her *mother* flowers? But of course he had. If there was one thing she’d learned about Felix, it was that he was predictably unpredictable. From their first kiss to their last he had been surprising her at every turn. Why should today be any different?

“That – that was very considerate of you.” She bit her lip, hedging between inviting him inside to deliver the flowers in person or asking him to leave. Introducing him to her mother would be a very personal step in their relationship. But was it a step she was ready to take? Perhaps if she introduced him as an acquaintance...just to test the waters, so to speak. Wasn’t it always better to dip your toe in the ocean instead of plunging headfirst into the surf? If not better, then surely it was safer. Who knew what could be lurking beneath the restless waves? One would hope there was nothing but smooth silky sand. But on the off chance there was a shark, it was far better to lose one’s toe than one’s life.

Her mind made up, she opened the door wider and stepped to the

side. “Won’t you please come in?”

“I thought ye would never ask.” He started to walk past her, then stopped short at the sight of Mr. Darcy sitting in the middle of the foyer waiting patiently for more feet to nip. Eyes wide, Felix took a step back. “I don’t know if ye mother knows this love, but there’s a giant rat in her house.”

“That is not a rat, that is Mr. Darcy, her Pomeranian.”

Felix snorted. “I know a rat when I see one and that thing is a bloody rat.”

“I can assure you he is *not* a rat.”

“Then what the devil is it?”

“I told you. He is a Pomeranian.” Not knowing whether to laugh or roll her eyes, Felicity did a combination of both as she gestured for Felix to come through the door. “I believe the breed originated in Germany.”

His eyes narrowed. “The Germans have always been sneaky bastards. I think they sold your mother a rat and made up a fancy name for it so she wouldn’t get suspicious.”

“Oh for heaven – do come inside, Mr. Felix. Or am I going to have to tell everyone you are terrified of a tiny little dog no bigger than a cat?” she challenged, one brow arching.

“Just keep it away from me,” Felix muttered as he walked past her and gave Mr. Darcy a long, hard look. Blinking, the Pomeranian tilted his head to the side and let out a little yip. “Bloody ‘ell! Look at its teeth!”

Felicity brought a hand to her mouth to muffle a giggle. “You are

being ridiculous. Mr. Darcy does not even bite. Very hard,” she added impishly, and could not contain her laughter when she saw a flash of something that very closely resembled fear in Felix’s eyes. “Why Mr. Spencer, I believe I’ve found your weakness.”

He tore his gaze away from Mr. Darcy to glower at her. “Everyone knows a rat will strip the flesh from your bones as quick as look at ye. Nasty, disease-riddled buggers. Only good rat is a dead one.”

“That may very well be true, but I can assure you if any harm comes to that dog, rats will be the least of your concerns. Shall we? The parlor is right through here. Come, Mr. Darcy.” She patted her thigh and the Pomeranian pranced past her, leading the way with his triangular ears pricked and his tail waving as if he were a miniature show pony instead of a yappy little ankle-biter.

As she pushed open the door to the parlor, Felicity was struck by an odd sense of familiarity, as if she had done this before. And in some ways she supposed she had, although not with Felix.

Eight years ago it had been Ezra who was shown into the parlor. Not by her, of course, and unlike Felix he’d actually been invited, but the similarities were still striking.

They’d both brought flowers. Felix with his bouquets of lavender, and Ezra with half a dozen long-stemmed yellow roses. They’d both come with the intention of courting her. And now that she thought about it, they’d both arrived at exactly half past eleven. Coincidence, she wondered, or fate? But what could fate possibly want with two men who had nothing in common and eight years between them? Eight years that might as well have been a lifetime for everything that

had occurred from when Ezra had called upon her for the very first time.

It had been raining that morning as well, she recalled. But then rain and spring so often went hand in hand. It was the day after the Dunmore Ball and she had hardly slept a wink. Caught in the throes of her very first love, she'd stayed awake to count down the hours until she would see Ezra again. When he finally arrived and her mother summoned her into the parlor it had taken every ounce of control she possessed not to lift up her skirts and race down the stairs two at a time.

Her first gentleman caller! How excited she had been. What she didn't know – what she couldn't know – was that Ezra would be her only gentleman caller. But at the time the only thing she was thinking about was how handsome he looked in his black tailcoat with his hair slicked back and his jaw freshly shaven.

He stood up when she entered the room, and her cheeks blushed with delight when he lifted her hand and brushed his mouth across the back of it.

"It is my deepest pleasure to see you again, Miss Atwood," he said, his voice clear and crisp. "Your stunning beauty puts these roses to shame, but I beg you to please accept them as a token of my blossoming affections."

Felicity's blush spread from her face to her collarbone, but her impeccable manners did not fail her as she graciously accepted the flowers and dipped into a perfect curtsy complete with a demure chin tilt. "Thank you, Lord Ashburn. I shall treasure these always."

“I am sorry my husband could not be here to receive you, Lord Ashburn,” Mrs. Atwood said once they’d sat by the front window, Felicity beside her mother and Ezra centered across from them in the middle of a striped chaise lounge. “His father is ailing, I am afraid, and he was called to his bedside early this morning.”

“I am terribly sorry to hear that,” said Ezra. “Please extend my wishes for a speedy recovery.”

Mrs. Atwood nodded. “Thank you, my lord. I shall do that.”

A maid brought in a platter of refreshments, and over tea and scones they discussed a variety of topics from the weather to the opening of a new exhibit in the Leverian Museum. Named for Sir Ashton Lever, the museum boasted the largest collection of natural curiosities in all of England.

Any mention of politics was avoided, of course, as was anything that could be considered gossip. The rules governing polite conversation were quite strict, and both Felicity and Ezra adhered to every one while Mrs. Atwood looked on with a vague smile.

When it was time for Ezra to leave, Felicity accompanied him to the foyer and watched through the stained glass oval in the middle of the door as he walked to his carriage. Her heart fluttered in time with his steps, and before the black coach pulled away she fancied herself in love.

“What do you think?” she asked breathlessly when her mother rested her hand upon her shoulder and gently squeezed. “Isn’t he perfect?”

“No man is perfect, my dear. But,” Mrs. Atwood quickly added

when Felicity frowned, “I can certainly find no fault in his character, and I can see how taken you are with him.”

“He is everything I could have ever hoped for. Do you think he will call upon me again?”

“I think he would be a fool not to, and Lord Ashburn does not strike me as a fool.” Mrs. Atwood waited patiently for her daughter to finish gazing out the window like a love struck fawn before she clapped her hands together and said, “Come along now. We have a fitting appointment to prepare for.”

Felicity gasped. “I completely forgot!”

Mrs. Atwood smiled. “I thought as much. Hurry along and change, my dear. I shall wait for you here.”

Giddy with thoughts of Ezra, Felicity did not notice how quickly her mother’s smile faded. Or the hardness in her eyes when she turned and stared out the stained glass window.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHEN FELICITY AND FELIX stepped into the parlor Mrs. Atwood was standing beside the mantle gazing at a miniature portrait of her husband, and the children were nowhere to be seen.

“They’ve gone upstairs for an afternoon rest,” she said as she turned around. “The poor dears wore themselves out trying to see who could build the higher tower. Anne won, but only because she knocked Henry’s over. Clever girl.” The only evidence that she was surprised to see a strange man in her parlor was a quick blink as her gaze swerved past her daughter and narrowed on Felix. “And who might this be? You do not look like any solicitor I’ve ever seen. Pesky nuisances, solicitors. Always trying to get you to purchase something you have no need for. You’re not going to try to sell me a fan, are you?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” said Felix.

“Good. Are those flowers for me?”

“Aye, that they are.”

“You may place them in the vase over there. The green one, not the blue. I always thought purple flowers looked best in a green vase. Now forget-me-knots and dahlias, they should always be paired with blue. But for lavender and irises, green is best.” She paused and her eyes, the same unusual color as her daughter’s, flicked from the flowers to Felicity. “You know dear, it is very unseemly to let me

blather on without introducing me to your gentleman caller.”

“Oh no,” Felicity hastened to explain as her cheeks flushed with color just like they had eight years ago, although this time for an entirely different reason. “He is not here to call on me. He is here to...well, come to think of it I do not know why he is here. He has a habit of dropping in whenever he pleases.”

“Does he now?” Mrs. Atwood murmured.

Realizing how she’d made it sound, Felicity’s face turned even redder. “That isn’t what I - oh bother.” So much for only dipping her toe in the water. Another *faux pas* like that one and she might as well submerge her entire head. “Mother, this is Mr. Felix Spencer. He is a Runner on Bow Street and an *acquaintance*, not a gentleman caller.” Or a gentleman at all for that matter, she added silently.

This had been a very poor idea. But there was nothing she could do about it now except finish the introductions and get Felix out of the room as quickly as possible. It shouldn’t be too difficult, she reflected. Her mother was not a woman who suffered rogues lightly. Felix wasn’t going to be able to charm her as easily as he had Felicity, and she was confident that within just a few minutes he would be sent on his way.

“Mr. Spencer, may I introduce my mother, Mrs. Atwood.”

“A pleasure to meet you, ma’am.” Felix crossed the room and lifted her mother’s hand to his lips. “It is easy to see where your daughter inherited her beauty. You are absolutely stunning.”

Felicity’s smile was glib as she waited for her mother to deliver a crushing let down, but to her utter astonishment Mrs. Atwood batted her lashes and giggled like a schoolgirl.

“Oh Mr. Spencer, you are a flirt, aren’t you?” Fluttering a hand in front of her face, she giggled again.

“Mother?” Felicity said uncertainly. “Are you not feeling well?”

Mrs. Atwood waved off her concern with a flick of her wrist as Felix put the lavender bouquet in the green vase. “I am perfectly fine. Better now that I’ve such a handsome man as this in my parlor. Pray tell Mr. Spencer, how is it you came to be an acquaintance of my dear daughter?”

Felix slanted Felicity a sideways glance that was nothing less than devilish. “Truth be told it’s quite an interesting story.”

“No,” Felicity said quickly. “No, the story is not interesting. In fact, it is *very* boring.” It was one thing to introduce Felix to her mother as a Runner. At least that was a respectable position. But if Mrs. Atwood learned her daughter had been keeping company with a reformed jewel thief Felicity did not know what her mother would do, or say. Especially if Felix revealed they’d kissed not once, not twice, but *three* times! But he wouldn’t dare. Would he? She peeked at him beneath her lashes, saw the wicked glint in his eye, and decided that yes, he very much *would* dare.

Oh dear.

Oh dear, oh dear.

“Why do we not have a seat,” Mrs. Atwood said, oblivious to her daughter’s mounting panic, “and you can tell me all about it, Mr. Spencer.”

“I really do not think Mr. Spencer has the time—”

“I’d love nothing more, ma’am,” Felix interrupted, flashing her

mother his most charming of grins.

“Please, call me Dorothea.”

Felicity’s jaw actually dropped. “*Mother*,” she hissed. “Mother, you cannot be serious.”

“Why not?” Mrs. Atwood lifted a brow. “We are among friends, aren’t we? Surely the world will not catch fire if we address each other by our given names.”

“Yes, but–”

“Do be a dear and fetch Mr. Spencer a cup of tea, won’t you? The poor man looks positively parched.”

“I am rather thirsty,” Felix said gravely. “Chasing criminals does take its toll, I am afraid.”

Mrs. Atwood clucked her tongue. “I can only imagine. You do this city a great service, young man. We are in your debt.”

Oh for heaven’s sake.

“He is a *Runner*, Mother. Not the Prince Regent.”

Mrs. Atwood frowned at her daughter. “Please do not insult our guest by comparing him to *that man*, Felicity. We all know Mr. Darcy would make a better Prince Regent.”

That man, otherwise known as George Augustus Frederick, son of Mad King George and heir to the throne of England, was not highly regarded by...well, by anyone. While his father babbled away to dead people – or so the rumors went – the Prince Regent spent his days gambling and drinking and plotting on how best to overthrow the king.

“The tea, if you would be so kind, Felicity. Mr. Spencer is waiting.”

Felicity looked at Felix. If his smug grin and the amusement dancing in his eyes was any indication he was enjoying himself immensely at her expense.

Bothersome man.

She should have known better than to invite him in, but now there was nothing left to do but grit her teeth and suffer through. She still could not believe how her mother – her practical, no nonsense, do-not-fidget-and-keep-your-chin-up mother – was behaving, but perhaps she was coming down with a fever. It would certainly explain the giggling and the eyelash fluttering.

“Of course.” She managed a tight smile. “Just a moment.”

While her mother and Felix sat down across from one another, Felicity stomped to the side buffet and poured a cup of tea. She poured another cup for herself and seriously entertained the idea of adding a splash of her father’s whisky before deciding she needed wits about her more than she needed a stiff drink.

“Here you are, Mr. Spencer.” Delivering his tea with the sweetest – and fakest – of smiles, she started to sit beside her mother, but with a shake of her head Mrs. Atwood pointed at the empty chair right next to Felix.

“You know how I like to look at someone when I am speaking to them,” she said.

Felicity knew nothing of the sort, but not wanting to argue she did as her mother asked. She could feel Felix watching her as she sank gracefully into the chair and smoothed out her skirts and she kept her gaze straight ahead, not wanting to look at him any more than was

absolutely necessary.

“So,” she began brightly, “what do you think about this weather? It has been unusually sunny, has it not?”

“Mr. Spencer, I believe you were going to tell me how you and Felicity first met,” said Mrs. Atwood, completely ignoring her daughter’s desperate attempt to steer the conversation in a direction that did not lead straight to reformed criminals and stolen kisses.

“Aye, I believe I was.” Felix leaned back in his chair, the soles of his boots disappearing beneath the wooden coffee table as he stretched his long legs out in front of him. “Fact of the matter is, Mrs. Atwood—”

“Dorothea.”

Felix’s grin was adoringly bashful. “Of course. Please excuse me. Fact of the matter is, Dorothea, when I met your daughter I was in the middle of a jewelry heist, such as it were.”

This, Felicity predicted darkly, was not going to end well.

“As it was a secret assignment for Bow Street I can’t give ye all the details,” Felix went on, “but I can tell ye that your daughter came upon me while I was gathering evidence and I was forced to detain her or risk the entire operation going under.”

Mrs. Atwood gasped out loud. “Oh my goodness. How thrilling! What happened then?”

Thrilling? Her mother thought Felix breaking the law was *thrilling*? The fever was getting worse, Felicity decided. Although her mother did not look like she was sick. Truth be told she looked the best she had in months. There was a missing sparkle in her eye and her cheeks were pleasantly flushed. She seemed...happy. Just like Henry had

when Felix offered to take him Ponding and little Anne when he'd taught her the different horse colors.

Considering, Felicity took a sip of tea as Felix continued.

"Your daughter, thinking I was a nefarious sort for some reason or another--"

"Because you were *stealing jewelry*," she could not help but interrupt.

"Let the man speak," Mrs. Atwood chided. "Go on, Mr. Spencer. You were saying?"

"Unbelievable," Felicity muttered.

"I wasn't stealing jewelry, love." Felix looked hurt at the mere suggestion. "As I told Dorothea, I was gathering evidence."

"Evidence you've yet to return," she pointed out. "Evidence that does not *belong* to you."

"Aye, ye are right about that. It's property of Bow Street now." He tilted his head so only she could see his quick, mischievous wink. "And who knows when it will be needed again?"

"I believe it is safe to say that case is closed, don't you?" she said meaningfully. "Given that the two individuals involved have most assuredly resolved their differences."

His rangy shoulders lifted and fell in an innocent shrug. "Ye never can tell about these things."

"Since we both attended their *wedding*, I think in this particular case we can."

"Aye, ye might be right about that." He lowered his voice. "But I'm still not giving that hair comb back."

Their gazes met. Held. Lingered. Felicity felt the muscles in her stomach clench as the butterflies she'd been doing her very best to suppress stirred to life and stretched out their wings. She bit her bottom lip, an unconscious gesture that drew Felix's gaze down to her mouth. His eyes darkened, dusky beige turning to deep bronze as he shifted towards her, a subtle movement that brought their bodies within inches of touching.

Mrs. Atwood cleared her throat. Loudly. "I do believe we can all agree that the circumstances under which you met my daughter were unusual, Mr. Spencer."

"Aye." Reluctantly tearing his gaze away from Felicity, Felix straightened in his chair. "That we can."

"And now the two of you are...friends?"

"Acquaintances," Felicity said quickly.

Felix leaned forward. "Would ye like to hear the truth, Dorothea?"

"Always," Mrs. Atwood replied without hesitation.

"Well then, the truth is that I fancy daughter. More than fancy, to be honest. And I'd like your permission to court 'er."

"*Mr. Spencer*," Felicity gasped even as a delighted thrill shot down her spine and her cheeks flushed a deep, delighted pink. "My mother does want to hear—"

"Yes," Mrs. Atwood said calmly. "Your mother does. Now then, Mr. Spencer." She gestured at him to continue with an elegant wave of her hand. "Go on. Before my daughter so rudely interrupted – again – you were saying...?"

Felix settled back in his chair, hands lightly curled around the

scrolled ends of the armrests. "I've been tryin' to court her, but it seems I haven't been doing a very good job as she's not yet fallen for my considerable charms. Seeing as she's fond of rules and such I thought if I did it all proper like, with your permission, she might be more..."

"Agreeable?" Mrs. Atwood suggested.

Felix flashed her a grin. "Aye. More agreeable. She's a stubborn woman, your daughter. Has an answer for ever damn thing, no matter what it is. And she's always picking fights."

"I am not always trying to pick a fight!" Felicity exclaimed. "*You* are the one who is argumentative."

Felix glanced at Felicity and then back at her mother with one brow raised as if to say, '*Do ye see what I mean*'?

The corners of Mrs. Atwood's mouth twitched, but she managed to retain a sober expression. "I must admit I find this all *very* interesting, Mr. Spencer, as the daughter *I* know would never dare do anything as unladylike as argue. Nor would she keep company with a man of your...shall we say, temperament."

Shame and embarrassment had Felicity squirming in her chair. Hadn't she already put her poor mother through enough with the divorce? And her father! She wouldn't have been surprised if he was turning in his grave. Oh, *why* had she allowed herself to be wooed by a rogue? And not just any rogue, but a common born thief! One who had openly admitted to any number of inappropriate acts, the least of which was stealing precious jewelry from her own closest friend! Felix was exactly the sort of man her mother had once warned her to stay

far away from. She never should have spoken to him, let alone fallen in love!

As if you had much choice in the matter, her heart reminded her. He may have pursued you first, but he wasn't the only one participating in those kisses. Or have you forgotten?

Oh do be quiet, her head replied. You're the one who got us in this mess in the first place!

"Mother, please let me explain—"

"Do be quiet, Felicity."

"But Mother, if you would just—"

"I said be *quiet*."

Felicity's cheeks paled. She may have been a woman full grown, but when Mrs. Atwood used that tone of voice she would forever be an eight-year-old girl with her hand caught in the cake tin.

"Yes Mother," she said meekly, lowering her gaze to her lap where her fingers had twisted into one large knot of abashment.

"Now then. Where were we, Mr. Spencer? Oh yes," Mrs. Atwood said pleasantly. "You had just ask for my permission to court my daughter, and I was about to tell you how exceedingly inappropriate the *ton* would find such a relationship. Why, I dare not even imagine the gossip it would stir. Have you thought about what people will say?"

"No. That I haven't."

"And why not?" Mrs. Atwood queried.

"Because I don't give two shites what anyone thinks. Never have before, and I don't plan on starting anytime soon." He leaned back in

his chair, embodying a perfect air of nonchalance save for the sudden rigidity in his fingers as his grip on the armrests tightened. “I know I’m probably not the sort of man you envisioned ever asking for permission to court your daughter.”

“You are quite right about that.”

“But that does not mean I’m wrong for her.”

“Is that so?” Mrs. Atwood murmured.

“Aye.” The single syllable word was sharply spoken, betraying the tension that simmered just beneath his amicable expression. “But she thinks I am, which is why I’m here.”

“You believe my opinion holds weight over my daughter and if I approve of you she will be more inclined to do the same.” It wasn’t a question, but a statement.

Felix gave a clipped nod. “I do.”

“Well in that case, you have my full blessing.”

“He what?” Felicity said in stunned disbelief. Of all the possible outcomes, this was *not* one she’d been expecting. Her mother actually approved of Felix? Impossible!

“You needn’t look so surprised my dear,” Mrs. Atwood said mildly.

“I – I just thought–”

“You thought because Mr. Spencer does not have a title or a formal education or any qualities pursuant to a gentleman – no offense intended, Mr. Spencer –”

“None taken,” Felix said cheerfully.

“–that I would send him packing, did you?”

Felicity snuck a quick glance at Felix before she admitted, “Yes. I

did.”

“Perhaps once I would have.” Mrs. Atwood scratched Mr. Darcy behind the ear and the Pomeranian’s tail became a tiny white blur of happiness. “But over time I have come to realize something very important. Do you know what that something is, Felicity?”

“No.” At the moment Felicity felt like she knew nothing.

“I realized that love, true love, does not distinguish between classes. And I would rather my only child be happy with a pauper than miserable married to a prince.” Her gaze sharpened. “That being said, you *aren’t* a pauper, are you Mr. Spencer? My daughter has been through enough. I will not have her beggaring herself on the streets.”

“I don’t have the wealth of a duke, if that’s what you’re asking, but I’ve a steady income and enough tucked away for a rainy day or two.”

“One can hardly ask for more than that. I wish you well, Mr. Spencer.” Mrs. Atwood’s gaze flicked to her daughter. Her lips thinned, pinching in at the corners as a line creased her brow. It appeared for a moment as if she was going to say something of great significance, but with a tiny sigh and shake of her head she simply said, “You are going to need it.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“THIS IS A MISTAKE.” Peering out the carriage window at the long line of men and women streaming between the massive white pillars of the Lyceum Theatre, Felicity let the curtain slip through her fingers and murmured a quick prayer. “I wish to return to my mother’s.”

“Your mother is the one who suggested we come in the first place,” Felix reminded her.

“I believe she may be gravely ill.”

“Because she likes me?”

“Yes.”

“Well in that case,” he drawled, eyes gleaming a bright, suggestive gold as he leaned forward and braced his arms beside her hips, “I fear ye are on death’s door, Miss Atwood.”

She pushed halfheartedly against his chest with a gloved hand. “I do not like you *that* much.”

“But ye do like me,” he said with the arrogance of a man who knew he was speaking the absolute truth. “No point in denying it any longer.”

No, there wasn’t.

Nearly three weeks had passed since Felix received her mother’s blessing, and in that time he had begun courting her in earnest. Every day he either brought flowers himself or had them delivered. They’d

taken long strolls through Hyde Park and marveled over the oddities at the Leverian Museum. He'd given Henry a tour of Bow Street, just as he'd promised he would, and then they'd all spent the rest of the afternoon sailing a pond yacht in the Serpentine.

He hadn't kissed her again, nor had he tried to. She'd made it clear that while she was willing to give the courtship a chance, there were two rules he would have to abide by. The first was that aside from flowers, she would accept no gifts of a material nature. The second was that he would keep his hands to himself. Felicity wanted to approach their relationship with a clear head and a steady heart, neither of which she was capable of sustaining when he touched her.

"I am not denying anything," she said matter-of-factly. "I am simply saying that this, coming here tonight, is a mistake." Of its own accord her gaze shifted back to the window and the curtain that covered it.

Inside the darkly intimate confines of the carriage she and Felix were protected from the outside world, but the moment they stepped out they would become vulnerable to all of the stares and whispers and vicious conjecture the *ton* could muster. In the park and the museum they'd managed to slip by unnoticed; just one more couple in a sea of faces. But the theater, especially one as grand as the Lyceum, was a place where people went to see and be seen.

Tickets were nearly impossible to acquire and sold out months in advance, but three years ago the Bridgeton Waverly Women's Club had pooled their money and purchased a box which they rotated between themselves and their families. Tonight it had been Mrs. Atwood's turn to see Shakespeare's renowned masterpiece *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream. The reviews were excellent, the play heralded as one of the best the Drury Lane Company had ever produced, but Mrs. Atwood said she wasn't feeling well and had insisted Felicity and Felix take her place.

"The box will simply sit empty otherwise," she'd claimed. "And the Bridgeton Waverlys will never let me hear the end of it. You must attend."

"If you are not feeling well, who will watch the children?" Felicity had asked. She and Henry and little Anne were now living – temporarily – in her mother's guest bedchamber. It was not the solution she'd wanted for fear of the stress it would cause her mother, but to her surprise Mrs. Atwood's health had vastly improved since they'd moved in. Her strength had increased tenfold and she no longer took to her bed for long stretches of time complaining of megrims. If she really was feeling unwell, this was the first Felicity was hearing of it.

But Mrs. Atwood had waved her daughter's concerns away with a flick of her wrist. "We'll be able to manage by ourselves for a few hours. They've been so well behaved I am certain it will not be any trouble at all."

"They tied wings to Mr. Darcy and tried to throw him out the second-floor window."

"A minor incident."

"Not for Mr. Darcy."

But in the end, despite all of her arguments and concerns, Felicity had been no match for her mother's stubbornness. Thus three nights

later she found herself sitting in a carriage with Felix outside the Lyceum Theater, the very last place in all of London she wanted to be.

It wasn't that she disliked the theater. Quite the opposite, actually. She'd always enjoyed the arts, and the Drury Lane Company was the best in the business. If she could have snuck inside and watched the production with no one being the wiser she would have done so happily, but she feared that was not going to be the case.

As the footman came around to open the door and she stepped out in a swirl of midnight blue skirts, she felt as though she were attending her first ball all over again. The one where she'd been terrified of falling flat on her face. Inside her black satin gloves her palms were clammy, and her heart beat in an irregular rhythm. Had Felix not been beside her with a steady grip on her arm she might have turned and fled back into the carriage, something he must have sensed for he leaned in close to whisper in her ear.

"Ye have nothing to be afraid of, love."

Her spine stiffened. "I am not afraid."

Except she was. Ridiculous and vain as it seemed, the opinions of her peers mattered. She'd told herself they didn't. In the dreary mist with anger fueling her thoughts she'd told herself she had nothing to be ashamed of and to hell with anyone who believed otherwise. But standing at the foot of the marble steps leading up into the theater she felt nothing *but* shame. And even though they weren't – even though no one had even noticed their arrival – she felt as though everyone was staring straight at them.

"We can leave if ye want to." Felix's quiet voice made her jump.

She'd all but forgotten he was still beside her. He squeezed her arm, just a small, innocuous flex of his fingers, but it was exactly what she needed to reassure herself that the world was not going to end if people spoke unkindly about her. Especially people who had never been her friend to begin with.

For the difficult truth – the hard truth – was that none of the men and women flocking into the theater had ever *really* been her friend. If they had, if they'd cared about her even a little bit, they never would have abandoned her the second her name carried the slightest whiff of a scandal. Never would have gossiped about her. Never would have stared when she walked down the street, their eyes burning holes in the middle of her back, right above where they'd plunged their knives.

These were not her friends. Not anymore.

But Felix was.

“No. We came here tonight to see a play, and that is precisely what we are going to do.” She marched between the marble pillars with her chin held high. And when people stared and whispered and pointed, just as she'd feared they would, she did not allow her posture to waver.

Her reputation would never be what it had once been, but she'd be damned if she allowed herself to be cowed into hiding her face for something she had not done. If there was anyone who should have been ashamed, if there was anyone who should have stayed at home with the curtains drawn, it was Ezra.

He was the one who had brought this upon them. *He* was the one who had caused the scandal. *He* was the one who deserved the vicious

gossip and scathing stares. And if he was able to get on with his life as if nothing had happened, then by God so could she.

An usher dressed in deep red with gold tassels hanging from his shoulders escorted them to their box seat. The first time Felicity had ever attended the theater she'd been surprised by how bright it was, and tonight was no exception. Even as the moon began its ascent into a clear, dark sky, the interior of the Lyceum was brightly lit courtesy of enormous chandeliers, each one boasting over a hundred individual candles. One of the great benefits of sitting in a box – aside from the obvious reasons of privacy and a superior view of the stage – was that one did not have to suffer hot wax dripping onto their head.

The curtains remained closed as people continued to trickle in and take their seats. Sinking gracefully into hers, Felicity watched with a touch of amusement as Felix went to the edge of their box and peered down over the railing, his expression one of wonderment and disbelief.

“Haven’t you ever been here before?” she asked.

“Never,” he said, glancing back at her. A lock of hair tumbled across his brow and he tucked it absently behind his ear. He’d worn all black tonight save a crisp white cravat that emphasized his golden skin. His brown hair was swept back from his face – all except for that errant curl – and he had trimmed his dark side-whiskers so they hugged the long, lean lines of his jaw. If one overlooked the roguish glint in his eye it would be easy to mistake him for an aristocrat. But the more she got to know Felix, the more grateful Felicity became that he *wasn’t* a lord.

As an earl, Ezra had always been obsessively concerned with keeping up appearances. Everything, from the shine on his shoes to the curls on the wig he wore when he attended Parliament, had to be absolutely perfect. His title and sterling reputation had meant everything to him. In the end, they had meant even more than his wife and children.

“What is it?” Felix asked when her stare lingered. He ran his knuckles across his chin. “Do I ‘ave something on my face?”

“No. I was just – you’re very handsome,” she blurted. Hoping the sudden color in her cheeks would be attributed to the heat radiating down from the chandeliers, she withdrew her fan from her reticule and waved it furiously in front of her face. “I meant to say, you look very dashing this evening.”

“Thank ye.” A grin crinkled the corners of his eyes as he leaned back against the railing. “And ye don’t look half bad yourself. I’ve never seen ye in that dress before. Is it new?”

Her gloved fingertips smoothed an invisible wrinkle from the lace overlay on her skirt. The blue gown was one she’d worn before she married Ezra. It was nearly eight seasons out of fashion, but of course Felix did not know – or care – about such things.

“I have not had an occasion to wear it in quite a long time.”

“Well it suits ye. You’re a beautiful woman, Miss Atwood.” The chandeliers paled in comparison to the heat coming from his gaze. It swept across her as the sun scorched the earth, leaving her breathless and uncomfortable and aching in places she wasn’t entirely certain she wanted to ache.

“I’ve missed touching ye,” he said huskily.

Her blush intensified. “Mr. Spencer—”

“I’ve missed the softness of your skin. The taste of your lips.” He pushed away from the railing. The space in the box was limited, and all it took was two strides for him to reach her. His tailcoat fell open as he leaned in close, enveloping her in a dark cloak of sin and seduction. “Have ye missed me?” He angled his head so his words brushed against her cheek like a caress. “Have ye dreamed about me as I’ve dreamed about ye?”

Her fingers curled under her seat, nails digging into the wood as she anchored herself to the chair. “Mr. Spencer, please. My rules were very clear.”

“Ah, love. Don’t ye know rules are meant to be broken?”

She trembled when she felt his tongue slide along the edge of her ear. Gaspd when he bit down on her lobe and drew it between his teeth. “I – I am afraid I have never heard that particular saying,” she said weakly as he began to suckle.

Oh heavens. This was *precisely* why she’d made the rules in the first place! Because the second he touched her all common sense went out the window. Squirming, she pressed her thighs together in a desperate attempt to stop herself from dissolving into a sticky pool of honey.

They could not do this here of all places! And especially not now, when the theater was still aglow with light and people were still walking below them on their way to their seats. But loathe as she was to admit it, there was something deliciously decadent in doing what she ought not to. It may have been terribly wrong of her to allow

herself to be seduced in such a public setting, but it felt oh so right. Especially when Felix cupped her breast through the thin fabric of her gown and began to leisurely circle her nipple with the pad of his thumb.

Inhibition followed common sense out the window as her spine arched away from the back of her chair with so much force she feared she might have popped a stay. Felix's husky laughter tickled the downy hairs at the nape of her neck that had escaped her elegant coiffure. He continued to lean over her, his open jacket shielding her body from any prying eyes. If someone happened to glance in their direction it would look as though he was merely whispering a secret in her ear.

A very naughty, very wicked secret.

"Do ye like that, love?" he murmured when her nipples tightened in response to his touch. Her breasts grew heavier, straining against the restrictive confines of her bodice. "Do ye like when I put my hands on ye?"

"Yes." The word escaped as a choked gasp.

"Look how flush your cheeks are. You're vibrating, love. Can ye feel it?" He nuzzled her neck, teeth nipping at the sensitive spot where her throat and collarbone met. "Like a finely plucked bowstring," he murmured before he soothed the bite with a teasing flick of his tongue. "Are ye going to play music for me, love? That's it." His hand slid down across her ribs and slipped between her thighs, pushing aside layers of crinoline and lace until his fingers pressed against the pulsing heart of her desire. "That's what ye want, isn't it?"

It was. It was what she wanted. And had the trumpets not sounded at that precise moment to announce the beginning of the play, Felicity did not know to what lengths she would have gone to in order to get it.

“M-Mr. Spencer.” Her voice felt heavy on her tongue, as it had the night she and Scarlett delved into her father’s liquor cabinet. Except this time she was not drunk on elderberry wine left over from Christmas, but on desire. “The actors have t-taken the stage.”

“Aye, so they have.” And as if nothing was amiss, as if he’d not just been touching her in the wickedest of places and whispering the wickedest of things, Felix straightened, buttoned up his coat, and sat down beside her.

Bewildered by how he could appear so calm and unaffected while she was still struggling to catch her breath, Felicity discreetly pulled her bodice up and pushed her skirts down. Picking up her fan, she snapped it back open with a quick turn of her wrist and began to wave it feverishly in front of her cheeks.

“Does – does it feel overly warm in here to you?”

His gaze trained on the stage, Felix shrugged. “A little bit, I suppose. Probably the chandeliers.”

“Yes.” Her lips pressed together. “I am sure that must be it. Mr. Spencer, are we just going to pretend–”

He interrupted her with a hushing sound that had her eyebrows climbing all the way up to the middle of her forehead. “Are you attempting to *shush* me?” she demanded in a hissed whisper.

“I am attempting to watch the play.” He slanted her a look of

marked disapproval out of the corner of his eye. “Which is rather hard to do with you chattering on like a blue-headed wagtail.”

A blue-headed wagtail?

A blue-headed wagtail?!

Her nostrils flared. “Mr. Spencer—”

“I’m not going to have to go get one of those stuffy blokes in the red coats, am I?”

“No.” Drawing on every bit of her debutante training, she managed to fix something that vaguely resembled a smile on her face. “No, you are not.”

Bothersome, annoying, irksome man!

For the rest of the first act she refused to so much as look at him, but by the time Puck and King Oberon began to conspire to make Queen Titania fall in love with a donkey she couldn’t help but begin stealing a series of sideways glances in his direction.

He was watching the play with unwavering attention. For all intents and purposes she might as well have ceased to exist. Had she fallen asleep and dreamt his mouth on her neck and his hand...well, his hand down *there*?

She set her jaw, teething grinding together in silent frustration.

No, no she had not.

It had happened. She knew it had happened as surely as she knew the sky was blue and the grass was green. And she...she had not become hysterical. Felicity drew in a sharp intake of breath at the stunning realization. *She had not become hysterical.* Felix had touched her. Intimately. And she’d been so wrapped up in passion and lust and

raw, blatant *need* that she hadn't thought about what Rodger had done to her, or how helpless she'd felt when he was doing it. In fact, she hadn't thought about him at all.

Felix had made her forget...and he'd used the most delicious means to do so. She peeked at him again, catching him mid-laugh, those warm golden eyes bright with amusement as he chuckled along with the rest of the audience at the antics taking place on stage. He was quite literally sitting on the edge of his seat, gaze darting left and right as Lysander and Demetrius, enchanted by a love spell, made fools of themselves over the very bewildered Helena, much to the general annoyance of Hermia, who was in love with Lysander.

It was a rather silly, foolish play about silly, foolish people. Felicity had seen it performed countless times before and could have recited every line by heart, but Felix's boyish enthusiasm was infectious and soon she found herself watching it as though for the very first time.

When the third act concluded with the four young Athenian lovers falling into an exhausted sleep in the middle of the forest and the mischievous Puck – who had cast the love spell in the first place – vowing everything would be right in the morning, heavy velvet curtains swept across the stage.

“That's it?” Felix scowled at Felicity as though she were the one personally responsible for the act ending at that particular moment instead of Shakespeare. “What about Hermia's father? And Theseus? And–”

“It is only the intermission,” she explained. Her lips twitched. “There are still two acts to go.”

“Oh.” The crease in his brow softened. “Well why didn’t they bloody say so?”

“I believe it is implied.”

Muttering something unintelligible under his breath, he stood up. Bracing his hands on the railing, he peered down into the gallery where everyone remained standing, not wanting to give up their place. In the other boxes men and women stood and stretched and began to move around, seeking both refreshment and socialization as they walked out into a large hallway that wrapped around the rear of the theater.

“What the devil are we supposed to do now?” he asked.

That, she thought silently, is an excellent question.

Part of her wanted to remain squirreled away in their box until the play resumed, but the other part – the part that had put one foot in front of the other and marched herself in here – demanded she face her peers with her head held high. No small task given the painful gossip she’d been forced to endure over the last twelve months, but wasn’t it time – past time, actually – to show to herself, and to Felix, and to anyone who had ever said anything cruel or thoughtless, that their opinion really *didn’t* matter?

People would always think what they wanted, and left to their own devices they would always tend to think the worst. No gossip was ever fed by good intentions, but she could not allow that gossip to dictate her actions, or her happiness, or her future.

Not anymore.

“During intermission light refreshments are served in the hallway.”

She twisted in her chair to look out the door. In the soft glow streaming underneath it she could see the shadows of slippers feet walking past.

“Do ye fancy a drink and a tea cake, then?” Felix spoke with a distinct air of nonchalance, but Felicity could tell by the intensity of his stare that the question was not as forthcoming as it appeared.

He wasn’t just asking her if she wanted a glass of watered down champagne and a stale sweet. He was asking if she was prepared to face what awaited them. He was asking if she was ready to stand by his side and announce their courtship to the entire *ton*. He was asking if she was ready to plunge headfirst into the ocean. An ocean infested with sharks who had very, very sharp teeth.

“Yes.” Rising from her chair in an elegant swirl of blue skirts, she extended her arm. “Yes, I believe I do.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

INWARDLY BRACING HERSELF for what was to come, Felicity walked out into the hallway with a smile on her face and a lightness in her step that did nothing to betray the rapid beating of her heart. Beside her Felix stood tall and true, a strong mast in a tumultuous sea.

She knew if it were up to him he would have told everyone staring at them to go straight to the devil. Then he'd grab a bottle of champagne and head for the nearest door. But he understood facing her peers was important to her, and for that she loved him all the more.

Love. What a short, simple word to describe such a tangled web of emotions.

She hadn't told Felix that she was in love with him yet. At least not in so many words. But surely he knew that she was, just as she suspected he was in love with her. For why else would he continue to bring her flowers every day? Why accompany her on long walks through the park, or go to all the trouble of fixing up a little boat for Henry, or help Anne put bows in Mr. Darcy's fur, if not for love? After all, a long courtship was not for *his* benefit. If he had his way...if he had his way she'd already be in his bed.

Her toes curled at the not-unpleasant-thought, and the fire in her belly smoldered anew. Banking down the flames, she forced herself to

focus on the task at hand.

Aside from a new chandelier, the private hallway, reserved strictly for those in the box seats, looked exactly the same as she remembered it. While furniture was sparse – the room was intended for socializing, not sitting – it was luxuriously adorned with a thick blue and gold carpet, green silk wall hangings, and floor length curtains in deep burgundy. The curtains had been pulled back to offer a clear, unfiltered view of the city. From this height everything looked so very small; a dotted maze of rooftops and soft lights that glowed ever brighter as night sank its inky fingernails into the horizon.

Servants dressed in all black balancing large silver platters moved discreetly around the crowd of three or four dozen. They offered flutes of champagne and miniature cucumber sandwiches cut into neat triangles and garnished with a sprig of ginger.

“We’ll take two of those.” Felix waved down a servant and neatly plucked two glasses off his tray. “Thank ye kindly, mate.”

“Thank you,” Felicity murmured when he pressed one of the crystal flutes into her hand. She wasn’t particularly thirsty, but holding onto the glass gave her fingers something to do other than hover awkwardly at her waist.

“Do ye know anyone here?” he asked.

“Yes.” She brought the flute to her lips as she scanned the room. “I know all of them.” And yet not a single one had met her gaze or come over to introduce themselves to Felix. They were not giving her the cut direct, but everyone was being very careful to keep their distance. *Scandal by association*, she thought with a bitter twist of her mouth.

One of the first unwritten rules every young debutante was taught to abide by.

“Miss Atwood!”

Her fingers tightening around the flute’s delicate stem, Felicity turned at the sound of her name. A curvaceous woman with curly brown hair springing out in every direction was squeezing through the crowd, her warm smile a welcome sight in a sea of frosty glares.

“Miss Atwood. I thought that was you.” Breathless by the time she reached them, the brunette’s ample chest heaved up and down as she dragged air into her lungs. “Lady Harriet. Lady Harriet Grisham.”

“I know.” Felicity met the woman’s smile with one of her own. Harriet’s brother, the Earl of Appleton, was a close friend of Ezra’s. The two had attended Eton together, and while they’d both gone on to marry (Ezra more than once), Harriet remained firmly on the shelf. It was not hard to see why. In addition to being a tad plumper than the gentlemen seemed to prefer, Harriet was a loud, awkward creature who was forever saying the wrong thing at exactly the wrong time. In short, she was a well-bred gentleman’s worst nightmare and nothing – not even a generous dowry – had managed to convince one of them to step up with an offer of marriage.

She and Felicity had met at the Lyceum five years ago during a dramatic performance of *Hamlet*. Their paths had crossed infrequently since then – Appleton did his best to keep his sister out of the public eye – but Felicity had always regarded Harriet with fondness.

“You look well,” she said, noting the pink flush in Harriet’s cheeks that bespoke of good health. “Are you here with your brother?”

“And his wife.” Harriet rolled her eyes. “She talked through the *entire* first act. Complaining about this, that, and the other. Honestly. But enough about her. How are you? I couldn’t believe my ears when Lady Manheim said she saw you in the Bridgeton Waverly Women’s box. I thought surely she was mistaken. But here you are!”

“Lady Manheim is here?” But of course she was. Eleanor never missed an opportunity to be seen. Before Felicity’s fall from grace they’d often attended the theater together three, four, five nights in a row. The play was the same, but then one never went to the Lyceum for the play. They went for the people.

“Yes. And she’s saying the most *horrible* things about you.” Harriet winced. “I am so very sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s quite all right.” And for the first time, it truly was.

For a woman who prided herself on perfection, having her good name and her reputation completely destroyed had been nothing short of devastating. It had formed a knot in her chest, and with every whisper and every cruel bit of gossip and every calling card that had gone unreceived the knot had tightened until there were times Felicity feared it was going to strangle her from the inside out.

She’d tried to untangle the knot by continuing to follow the rules. By minding her manners and avoiding any further scandals and hoping, that with enough time, the *ton* would eventually forget and forgive. But the truth was...the truth was it really didn’t matter.

No matter how perfect she was or how much time went by, people would always have something cruel to say. People would always think worse of her than she deserved. But that did not mean she had to deny

herself the pleasure of attending a play, or a dinner party, or even going to a ball. Because for every Eleanor that cast a dark cloud there would be a Harriet to bring the sunshine.

And she was so very weary of hiding in the shadows.

As the knot in her chest finally began to loosen, Felicity smiled. Not the rigid, polite smile she'd been taught to wear when out in society, but a bright, brilliant smile that crinkled the corners of her eyes and showed off her slightly crooked incisor and was not at all flattering.

"Lady Harriet, I should like to introduce you to a very dear personal friend of mine, Mr. Felix Spencer."

"Mr. Spencer." Harriet extended one gloved hand and Felix bowed before he brushed his mouth across her satin covered knuckles.

"Lady Harriet. A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Brown eyes bright with curiosity, Harriet's gaze flicked from Felix to Felicity and then back to Felix. "Are you and Miss Atwood...?"

"Carrying on behind the garden shed?" he suggested with a devilish smirk.

"Oh! I would never imply—"

"Mr. Spencer is only jesting," Felicity interrupted with a warning glance at Felix. Poor Harriet's face was as red as the curtains and she feared her own countenance was a similar shade. Carrying on behind the garden shed, indeed! How did he even think to come up with such things? The man really was incorrigible. "I fear he has a rather wicked sense of humor."

Harriet appeared nonplussed for a moment, and then she shrugged. "There is nothing wrong with that, I suppose. Goodness knows that

my brother and his friends could well benefit from a bit of humor now and again. Oh dear,” she fretted, twisting her hands together as she looked ruefully at Felicity. “I was not suggesting that Lord Ashburn is without a sense of humor. Although he *did* divorce you, which is not a very humorous thing to do, so perhaps he truly is devoid of any wit. I should not have said that.” Her nose wrinkled. “I do apologize, Miss Atwood. I really cannot seem to help myself.”

“There is absolutely no need to be sorry, or to feel as if you need to censor yourself around me.” Leaning in close and speaking in a conspiratorial whisper, Felicity added, “Ezra never was very amusing.”

Harriet nodded sagely. “I can assure you he has not gotten any more so since he married that awful woman. Oh!” She clapped a hand over her mouth. “I should not have—”

“Stumbling over your own tongue again, Harriet? What a surprise.” Sailing up to them in a gown of emerald green and a glittering smile, Eleanor giggled as she not-very-subtly nudged the red-faced brunette out of the way. “Dearest Miss Atwood. I saw you from across the room and I just *had* to come over and say hello.”

Beside her Felicity felt Felix stiffen, but she laid a restraining hand on his arm before he said anything untoward. She would take care of Eleanor. In fact, it would be her great pleasure to do so.

“Did you?” she murmured, her own smile dimming considerably as she met Lady Manheim’s sharp, calculating gaze. *How very small and petty you are*, she thought silently. *And how foolish I was not to have seen it sooner*. She almost felt a stirring of pity for Eleanor. It must have been lonely, living a life that appeared so bright and fulfilling on

the outside but was so brittle and empty within. For if Eleanor was truly happy, if she was truly content, then she would not need to lower herself to dragging others down with cruel insults and cutting remarks. “That is very unfortunate, as I am afraid you have wasted your time.”

“And why is that?” Eleanor purred.

“Because I have nothing to say to you.” And with that Felicity turned her back, a direct cut that lifted a gasp from Eleanor’s lips and caused nearly a dozen heads to swivel.

“*What are you doing?*” she hissed. “You do not turn your back on *me*, you vile little wretch!”

“Careful,” Felix drawled, and even though his mouth was curved in a lazy grin his eyes were hard as flint. “Your ugliness is showing.”

It was fitting that Eleanor’s hands went immediately to her hair. When she realized Felix was referring to her character she bared her teeth and would have grabbed Felicity by the shoulder and forcibly spun her around had Felix not intervened.

He caught her arm in midair. “I wouldn’t do that if I were ye, my *lady*.”

“I say, what is going on over here?” Twenty years his wife’s senior, Lord Manheim walked with a slight limp, his right hand wrapped firmly around the polished silver handle of a long wooden cane. “You sir, unhand my wife at once!”

“Lady Manheim was just leaving. Isn’t that right, Eleanor?” Felicity spoke calmly as she turned to face her adversary with a lifted brow. “You can release her now, Mr. Spencer. I do not believe she is going to

bring us any more strife.” While a dozen people looked on with expressions running the gamut from shock to amusement, she stepped close enough to Eleanor to see the outraged throb of her pulse beating against the side of her neck. “You will never speak to me again. You will never approach me again. Is that clear?”

“You’re making a dangerous mistake,” Eleanor snarled, her face mottled with rage.

“No,” Felicity said simply. “The only mistake I made was ever believing you were my friend to begin with. You should leave, before you embarrass yourself any further.”

Eleanor’s eyes flashed. “Me? Embarrassed? *You* should be the one who is embarrassed! Parading yourself around like the whore you are. You’re not fooling anyone. Everyone knows that blonde-haired son of yours is a bas–”

Felicity slapped Eleanor with so much force that her head whipped to the side. The sound of it was like a clap of thunder. It echoed through the entire hallway, as did Eleanor’s shocked gasp.

“You struck me!” she cried in pained disbelief.

“And I shall do it again if you ever mention my children.” There was no anger in Felicity’s voice. She spoke quietly, smoothly, and her words carried all the more weight because of it. “That is not a threat, Lady Manheim. That is a promise. Now leave before I lose my temper and do something I may one day come to regret.”

The implication that she did not regret slapping Eleanor was clear, as was the hate in Eleanor’s eyes. She raised a trembling hand to her cheek, pressing lightly against the red imprint Felicity’s palm had left.

“You are going to rue—”

“That is enough,” Lord Manheim said sharply. “You’ve both said your piece. Eleanor, come with me. Our carriage is waiting outside.”

Eleanor’s mouth dropped open. “Did you not see what she *did* to me?”

“I do not believe there is a person in this room who did not.”

“And?” she demanded. “What are you going to do about it?”

Lord Manheim’s sigh was long and heavy, indicating this was not the first time he’d had a similar conversation with his wife and he knew it was not going to be the last. “Come along,” he said wearily. “What is done is done.” His gaze shifted. “Miss Atwood. Lady Harriet. I hope you can excuse my wife’s behavior. She has not been well as of late. Do enjoy the rest of the play.” He held out his arm. For a moment it appeared as though Eleanor was going to openly defy him, but with one last, lingering glare at Felicity she tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow.

“This is not over,” she seethed.

“Yes,” Felicity said evenly. “It is. Good night, Lady Manheim. I hope you feel better soon.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I CANNOT BELIEVE you did that. I saw it with my own eyes. I saw it. But I cannot believe you *did* it.” Clasp ing her hands together beneath her chin, Harriet looked up at Felicity with equal parts astonishment and adoration. “Where did you find the courage?”

Where indeed, Felicity thought?

“I – I do not know,” she admitted honestly. She still could not believe she had raised her hand in anger, let alone physically *struck* someone. But when Eleanor began to speak about Henry she saw red, and her arm acted of its own accord. Her palm still stung where it had connected with Eleanor’s cheek, a radiating pain that felt oddly satisfying. Curling her fingers inward to form a fist, she tucked the offending limb behind her back. “I should not have done it.”

Felix snorted. “I think what ye mean to say is ye should have done it a lot earlier.”

“Yes,” Harriet agreed “It is past time someone put Lady Manheim in her place. She’s always been quite mean to me, you know.” A frown pulled at the corners of her smile. “Yet I’ve never done anything to her. At least nothing I can recall.”

“Eleanor is only concerned with furthering her own self-interests,” Felicity said.

Harriet's head tilted in confusion. "I thought you were her friend?"

"I thought I was as well, for a time. But things change." She glanced over her shoulder at Felix. He met her gaze, the hint of a smile curling one side of his mouth.

"Aye," he agreed quietly. "That they do."

Biting down on the inside of her cheek, Felicity found herself being drawn into the warm depths of his eyes. Framed by short, thick lashes they really were a striking color. Dark pupils surrounded by dusky gold. Like honey sliding into a cup of black tea, the gold deepened to amber whenever he thought about kissing her...rather like it was doing right now. They were standing so close she could smell the soap he'd used to wash his hair, and she couldn't help but wonder what he looked like with water beading on his sun kissed skin and his muscles rippling in the soft glow of candlelight.

He would be hard and lean, she imagined. His body long and fluid, his stomach taut, his thighs powerful. The fire in her belly burst into flames as she imagined the taste of his lips. The brush of his side whiskers against her throat. The touch of his hand on her breast. He was right behind her. If she just tipped her head back...

Harriet cleared her throat.

Loudly.

"I should probably be on my way. My brother is no doubt looking for me as we speak." She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, gaze darting awkwardly between Felicity and Felix. "Erm...it was very nice to meet you, Mr. Spencer."

His hot gaze trained on Felicity, Felix gave a clipped nod of

acknowledgement.

“Interesting,” Harriet said, mostly to herself as neither Felix nor Felicity were paying her one whit of attention. They only had eyes for one another, and even though they were all standing in a very public place it seemed as though the two of them were a hundred miles away on their own private island. It must have been a very nice island, the kind with sandy white beaches and seashells and those silly looking trees with the fruit that hung down in peculiar little round balls.

“Did you say something, Harriet?” Feeling as though she were waking from a very deep trance, Felicity had to blink several times before she managed to tear her gaze away from Felix.

“I said it is interesting.”

Felicity blinked again. “What is?”

“Well, it’s just that I’ve always wondered what love looked like.” Harriet shrugged. “And now I know.”

FELIX ENJOYED THE SECOND half of the play even more than he had the first, although for an entirely different reason.

Having never seen a Shakespearean play before, let alone one performed by the Drury Lane Company, he’d been captivated from the first moment the actors took the stage and nothing, not even Felicity, had managed to distract him from the spell they were weaving. But now, as Puck delivered his final soliloquy, Felix was not looking at the stage at all. He was looking at Felicity and she was looking at him, her violet eyes dark and heavy lidded with desire.

Did she know she was gazing at him in a manner that invited all

sorts of wicked thoughts? If not for the bloody chandeliers lighting up the theater as if it were high noon in the middle of summer he would have taken her then and there. Against the wall. On the floor. In the chair. His entire body throbbed with need, but he still held tight to the rein he'd been using to keep his arousal in check over the past three weeks. He wouldn't loosen it until they were alone and Felicity finally admitted that she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Then – and only then – would he take what he had been craving since he'd first kissed her all those months ago.

Sweet, he thought as his loins tightened with anticipation. *She's going to taste so bloody sweet.*

When the play ended and everyone stood to give a standing ovation, Felix gripped Felicity by the arm and they walked quickly out of the box and down the same hall where Felicity had slapped the smirk right off of Lady Manheim's face.

The blow had been no less than the bitch deserved for what she'd been about to call Henry. If Felicity hadn't stepped forward then Felix would have, and while he wouldn't have raised his hand to her - his questionable moral compass stopped just short of striking women - he would have put her spoiled arse in Newgate for the night and seen how arrogant she was come morning.

"What is so amusing?" Felicity queried as they stepped out into the cool night air and paused at the top of the stairs.

The marble steps had been lit with torches so women would not trip over the hem of their gowns as they descended to the pavilion below. Ushers stood at attention with glasses of champagne and little crystal

bowls filled with fruit should any of the more affluent theatergoers desire a drink or a nibble while they waited for their carriage to be brought round. Private coaches and hired hackneys were already lined up around the block, some of them having never left, their drivers forced to sit and wait for hours on end.

“The look on Lady Manheim’s face when ye clocked her.” Grabbing an entire bowl along with two more flutes of champagne - it wasn’t every day Felix was able to experience how the other half lived, and he intended to take full advantage - he offered Felicity a strawberry and a glass.

She accepted the champagne but declined the fruit, and with a shrug Felix popped it into his mouth before he handed the bowl back to one of the ushers. The strawberry had been dipped in sugar and it all but melted on his tongue, much as he envisioned Felicity doing when he finally sampled the honeyed sweetness of her delectable little body.

He wondered where he was going to start. Nibbling her ear, or suckling on her toes? He would leave it entirely up to her, he decided. It did not matter either way to him. For before it was over there would not be an inch of her velvety skin he had not kissed or licked.

Buggerin’ hell.

Biting back a groan, Felix shifted subtly to the side as his trousers bulged. Had he ever looked forward to lovemaking with such anticipation? *Never*, he thought silently. For there’d never been an occasion to wait, thus there had never been any time for anticipation to build.

All of the women he'd bedded in the past had come to his bed willingly after only a few days, some after only a few hours. But Felicity was a different sort, and so instead of bedding her he'd courted her with more care and attention than a duke used to woo his future duchess. And to his surprise he had loved every minute of it.

Before he met Felicity he never would have imagined in a hundred years he would enjoy strolling idly through a park, or playing hide and seek with two giggling children, or attending a bloody play at the Lyceum Theater. Just *being* with Felicity brought him a sense of contentment he'd never felt before.

He considered himself blessed just to make her smile or hear her voice or feel the soft weight of her hand on his arm. But he was still a man, a man whose natural urges could only be suppressed for so long.

He'd been following Felicity's ridiculous rules because she'd asked him to, and because he knew there was still something she was keeping from him. But with every day that passed his ardor grew more difficult to control. She'd nearly broken him in the hallway when her raw, pulsing desire had clouded the air like the finest of perfumes. If he didn't know any better he would have sworn she had been undressing him with her eyes, but he supposed that was only the wishful thinking of a lust-crazed fool.

Felix grinded his teeth together. How much longer did she intend to make him wait? He knew she desired him. He knew she wanted him. He knew she *needed* him, the same as he needed her. But she was still holding herself back.

He suspected it had something to do with that worthless cur she'd

once called a husband. And the whispers that Henry was not Ezra's son. His jaw tightened. Something had happened to her. Something she wasn't yet willing share. Something she did not yet trust him with.

"I should not have slapped her." Worrying her bottom lip between her teeth - was the woman trying to drive him mad on purpose? - Felicity peeked shyly up at him, violet eyes filled with a distinct gleam of vindication that was at direct odds with her words. "But it did feel very good."

Felix grinned. "My wicked ways are finally rubbin' off on ye."

She pursed her lips. "I do not know if I would go *that* far."

"We can steal her jewelry if ye would like. That sapphire piece she was wearing is worth a pretty penny."

"Do not even think about it."

"Just a bracelet then."

"No."

"A ring?" he said hopefully.

"No."

"What's the fun in that?"

Exasperation tightened the corners of her mouth. "You are not a thief any longer. You are a Runner. Which means you cannot just go around stealing things."

His grin turned wolfish as he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her snugly against his side, breathing in the alluring scent of her hair. She smelled of honeysuckle, and night, and promises unfulfilled.

“I stole ye, didn’t I?” he whispered into her ear.

She pushed her hand half-heartedly against his chest. “You have not stolen anything.”

“I beg to differ.” He dipped his head to nuzzle the slender curve of her neck. “Ye want me, Miss Atwood. Ye can admit it.”

Even though she stood tall and stared straight ahead, that was an unmistakable quiver in her voice when she said, “I - I am not going to admit anything, Mr. Spencer. The hour is growing late. I have had a wonderful time, but the children will be looking for me. We need to flag down a hackney before they’re all taken.”

They may have been one of the first couples to leave their box, but while they’d been standing at the top of the stairs there had been a mass exodus of the theater. Men and women swarmed the steps and the pavilion below, some of them idly chatting, others indulging in one last glass of champagne, and the rest jostling to queue up for the coaches that would carry them home.

“Your mother put Henry and Anne to bed hours ago. They won’t be looking for ye ‘til morning,” Felix pointed out.

Felicity frowned. “That may very well be, but we still need a hackney.”

“Not if we go to my townhouse.” The arm he had wrapped around her waist tightened, fingers sinking through the thin layers of her cloak and dress to curl around the edge of her hip. “It’s only a few blocks.”

She twisted out of his grasp and met his gaze with narrowed eyes. Torchlight flickered across her face, illuminating the elegant arch of

her brows and the stubborn tilt of her chin. "And why would we go there?"

"Ye know why," he said huskily.

"My rules were very clear-"

"Aye, they were," he interrupted. "But ye weren't thinkin' about your precious rules when I had my hand up your skirt, now were ye?"

"Mr. Spencer, that is quite beside the point!" she hissed, blushing furiously as she looked over his shoulder, but after her transgression with Lady Manheim everyone was giving them a wide berth. Aside from a few side-eyed glances they may as well have been invisible, which suited Felix just fine. He may have enjoyed the play and the champagne, but with the exception of Harriet the company had left much to be desired.

"That is the point, love." He tucked a dark, silky tendril of hair behind her ear, the calloused pad of his thumb lingering on the soft curve of her jaw. "I want ye. Ye want me. What's left to discuss?"

"Lots - lots of things!" She looked so adorably flustered that he was tempted to kiss her then and there, but he restrained himself. If things went according to plan there would be plenty of kissing in their immediate future. He'd been patient for this long. What was another few moments? Because the second he had her alone he was going to do a lot more than just put his hand up her skirts...

"I know ye are afraid," he said evenly, his penetrating stare seeking out the secrets she wasn't ready to share. "And I know ye will not - or ye cannot - tell me why. But I won't hurt ye. And I won't hurt Henry or little Anne. Ye can trust me, love."

She shook her head. "I know you would never hurt them. You've been wonderful with them. More than wonderful, and they adore you. Henry especially. It's not that..."

"Then what is it?" he asked when her gaze lowered and her voice trailed away. "Have I not courted ye the right way? Because I only took flowers out of Lady Harcourt's garden once. Twice." He rubbed his jaw. "Seven times."

"Mr. Spencer!"

"What?" he said defensively. "It's not as if she'll miss them. The old woman's blind as a bat."

"Which is why she has so many flowers. So she can *smell* them."

"Lady Harcourt's flowers are not the reason ye don't want to go home with me tonight."

"No," Felicity agreed, sucking in on her cheek. "They're not." The creamy tops of her breasts peeked out through the triangular opening in her cloak when she drew in a heavy breath. "You were right before."

"I'm afraid ye will need to elaborate, love." He winked at her. "Given as I'm right all the time."

"Incorrigible," she muttered under her breath. "It was when you were sitting on my stoop with a bloody lip."

Felix absently touched his mouth. "I remember."

"You said I was afraid and you were right. But I shouldn't be. Not with you." She took another breath, this one deeper than the last before she pressed her palm flat against his chest, right over his heart. It beat steadily against her hand as he stood perfectly still. "Never

with you.”

Her violet eyes drew him into a world of shy, sensual promise as the hand on his chest slid lower. “Take me to your townhouse, Mr. Spencer.” Her fingers fell to the button on his trousers, one nail clicking against the polished metal surface. “Take me to your bed.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

FELICITY FELT AS THOUGH she were floating on clouds as she walked away from the Lyceum Theater with her hand firmly tucked into the crook of Felix's elbow. But she had no way of knowing if the clouds would carry her up into a blue, blissful sky....or dissolve into mist and send her plunging back down to earth.

To say her heart was in her throat would have been a vast trivialization. As far as she could tell her heart was lodged somewhere in her head, and the two were engaged in a vicious battle.

Her head was determined to turn her around and send her marching back for a hackney, while her heart was directing her straight into Felix's arms. With every small step she took towards his townhouse her heart gave a hard *thump* inside of her chest; a tiny celebration that her head was determined to quell.

This is what we said we would never do again! Her head blustered. *You cannot trust him.*

But it's Felix, her heart said reasonably. *He would never hurt us.*

He'll take everything from you, just as Ezra did. You're a fool to think otherwise. The only person you can trust is yourself.

Felicity's steps began to slow.

What am I doing? She thought helplessly. *What am I thinking?*

"It is only a little further." Misunderstanding her reason for

suddenly stopping in the middle of the empty street, Felix urged her forward with a gentle tug. “Down the lane and to the right. We’re nearly there.”

They’d exchanged bright torches and dramatic architecture for dimly lit lamps and a terrace of cream-colored stucco townhouses curved in a gentle crescent. The houses looked new, with sharp black trim around the windows and brick pathways framed with neatly trimmed boxwoods. They were also rather large, easily twice the size of Mrs. Atwood’s cozy rowhome, with balconies jutting out from the second and third floors.

Oddly enough, Felicity had never given much thought to where Felix lived. But whenever she *had* imagined it, this was certainly not what had come to mind. She’d imagined...well, she’d imagined he lived in something quite similar to the downtrodden flat she had been forced to leave. But these townhouses were sleek, modern – and no doubt *very* expensive.

“You live here?” she said, unable to prevent the doubt from creeping into her voice.

“Aye. Is that a problem for ye?”

“No. Of course not. It’s just...”

“Not what ye were expecting?” Looking amused, Felix faced her and lifted her hand to his mouth. Brushing his lips across her bare knuckles – she’d forgotten her gloves in the theater – he said, “On occasion I sleep on a cot at The Pony. We can go there if ye’d like.”

Another insufferable blush swept across her cheeks and she pulled her hand away. “I am sorry. I should not have assumed.”

“No,” he agreed, although he did not appear to be insulted in the slightest. “Ye shouldn’t have. Shall we, my lady?” But when he offered her his arm Felicity could do little more than stare at it as her body refused to move.

Blast her head! Why did it always have to draw the worst possible conclusion? The easy thing to do – the *right* thing to do – would be to take Felix’s arm and let him lead her into his home and into his bed. No more than ten minutes ago she’d stood before him and told him that was exactly what she wanted. But now...now she did not know *what* she wanted.

Felicity closed her eyes. She was not some quivering virgin about to climb into the marriage bed for the very first time! She knew what awaited her. She knew what lovemaking entailed. She’d had a husband, hadn’t she? But it wasn’t Ezra who filled her chest with ice when she thought of laying down beside Felix. Because it wasn’t Ezra who had clawed and grabbed and pinned her to the mattress.

And wasn’t that what – and whom – she was *really* afraid of?

Felix was a good man. He’d proven that time and time again, in a myriad of ways. And when it came to it – *if* it came to it – he would be a good husband and a good father. He wouldn’t cast her aside as Ezra had done. He wouldn’t hurt her like Rodger. That she believed with every beat of her heart. It wasn’t Felix who was preventing her from taking a step forward.

It was herself.

It was her own doubts and her insecurities and her fears. What if she tried to make love to Felix...and she couldn’t? What if she froze,

and her breathing quickened and black dots danced in front of her vision and she had one of her horrible attacks? Or even worse yet, what if they *did* make love...and Felix found her wanting?

Ezra always had. Not before Rodger, but after...after, when she could do nothing else but lay there and stare up at the ceiling, he'd rolled off her in disgust and left the room without a word. For four long years, before he stopped visiting her completely, it had been the same thing over and over and over again. And no matter how hard she willed her body to respond, she never could.

Was it any wonder, then, that he'd sought comfort in the arms of a mistress? For what sort of woman could not please her own husband?

"Felicity." Felix's gentle voice coaxed her from the dark depths of her own mind, and it wasn't until he brushed his finger against her cheek that she realized she'd begun to cry. "Ye can tell me, love. Whatever it is. Ye can tell me."

She blinked back her tears and shook her head. "What if it changes your mind? About me. About us. About any future we might have together."

Felix simply wrapped his arms around her trembling frame and pulled her into his protective embrace. For a few moments they both just breathed, their chests rising and falling in tandem before he rested his chin on top of her head and said, "There is nothing ye could say that would make me love ye any less. Nothing."

She sucked in a quick, surprised breath. "You – you love me?"

"Did ye think I've been courtin' ye for me own health?" His hold tightened. "Of course I bloody well love ye. And ye love me too, ye

daft, stubborn female.”

It took a bit of effort, but Felicity managed to wrench herself free of his grasp. “Perhaps you should not call the woman you just pledged to love daft or stubborn,” she said stiffly.

“And why not?” Felix demanded, his eyes flashing a hot, molten gold in the shifting shadows. “Ye *are* daft to think that anything from your past could prevent me from loving ye in the present. And ye are stubborn to have kept us apart for this long.”

When he put it that way...

“I have had my reasons,” she mumbled, dropping her gaze.

“Aye, I know.” He rubbed his chin. “Because of the scandal, and what people would say. But after that ringer ye gave Lady Manheim I’m inclined to think ye no longer give a flyin’ fish what anyone else thinks of ye. Nor should ye. So the only thing I’m left to assume is that even after all this time, ye still don’t think I’m good enough for ye.”

Her jaw dropped. Was that was he really thought?

“I never said that!” she exclaimed.

“Ye never had to, love.” Tipping onto his heels, he crossed his arms. “But I’m not half as dumb as I look.”

“I never thought you were dumb,” she said fiercely. “And I *never* thought you were not good enough for me. If anything, it is the opposite.”

Felix snorted. “Now that’s a crock if I’ve ever heard one.”

“It’s true,” she insisted when his top lip curled in disbelief. “There are things about me you do not know.”

“Then tell me.”

“It – it is not that simple.”

“Aye, it is.” His expression inscrutable, he cupped the nape of his neck and squeezed the corded muscles until his knuckles shone white in the weak lamplight. “We can go on as we have been for the next fifty years and I wouldn’t bat an eye, because I’d rather have part of ye than none at all. But that isn’t what I want, and I don’t think that’s what ye want either.”

“No.” She closed her eyes again. “It isn’t.”

She wanted more than a courtship. She wanted a lifetime. A lifetime of waking up beside him in the morning and falling asleep next to him at night. A lifetime of his roguish stares and naughty quips. A lifetime of knowing she was loved beyond measure. But in exchange for a lifetime, she needed to do the one thing she had sworn to herself she would never do again.

If she wanted the dream, she needed to finally face her demons.

She needed to tell him what had happened seven years ago.

She needed to tell him about Rodger.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Seven Years Ago

The Sherwood's Country Residence

“IS LADY SHERWOOD HERE?” Pulling off her soft leather kid gloves, Felicity tucked them beneath her arm before she untied her hat and slowly pulled it free of her hair. The foyer she’d been shown into was considerably darker than the bright sunlight outside, and it took her eyes several seconds to adjust. When they did she looked up to discover Scarlett’s husband slowly descending the staircase. Given the early hour – it was only a shade past nine – he was still in half dress, and she took a quick, embarrassed step back towards the door.

“Lord Sherwood. I apologize for interrupting your morning. The butler let me in. I was hoping to catch Scarlett before she left for her morning ride, but if she is not here–”

“You just missed her.” Stopping at the foot of the stairs, he draped his arm over the railing and regarded her with piercing green eyes and the hint of a smile. “Is there something *I* can help you with, Lady Ashburn?”

“No. No, that is quite all right.” Felicity could not pinpoint exactly *why* she was never comfortable in Lord Sherwood’s presence. She should have been. He was, after all, her best friend’s husband. They’d attended any number of dinner parties and social gatherings together.

Why, the four of them had just returned from a weekend in Bath. Her and Ezra, Rodger and Scarlett. And yet...and yet there was something about him that always caused the tiny hairs on the nape of her neck to prickle whenever he was near. Very much like they were doing right now. She took another tiny step of retreat. "I – I'll just be going, then."

"Wait." Rodger descended the last stair and walked across the foyer, his stockinged feet silent on the marble tile. "My wife left you something upstairs on the off chance that you were to stop by. I would be remiss if I did not give it to you."

"Oh. Well." She chewed on her bottom lip. "I can wait here while a servant retrieves it."

"The problem," said Rodger, looking charmingly sheepish, "is that I've forgotten what it was she left for you. A necklace, I believe. One she borrowed at the Headley's ball."

"Yes, she did borrow a necklace."

"Excellent! Then you'll be able to pick out the right one." His teeth flashed in a grin. "She has so many I can no longer tell one from the other, and she'd have my head if I disorganize them in any way."

Scarlett did take her jewelry very seriously.

And yet...

"I should really come back when Scarlett is here. I wouldn't want to intrude on her privacy."

"Nonsense. It will only take but a minute. Come with me."

Against her better judgement, Felicity followed Rodger up the stairs and down the hall. But instead of going to Scarlett's dressing chamber he entered a bedroom she'd never seen before and beckoned her

inside.

“Did Scarlett move her things?” Confused, she stepped into the room. It was clearly intended for guests, the four poster bed neatly made and a stack of clean linens sitting beside a porcelain wash basin. With the curtains pulled closed it was also rather dark, and she did not realize Rodger had stepped behind her to close the door until she heard it slide into place with a soft *click*. “Lord – Lord Sherwood, what are we doing in here?”

“Call me Rodger.” His smile thinned, taking on a predatory sharpness as he began to stalk her around the room. She took two steps back for every one step he took towards her, but the bedchamber was only so large, and soon she found herself trapped at the foot of the bed with nowhere else to go.

“Please, Lord Sherwood.” Her chest felt painfully tight and her skin had begun to crawl, as if tiny ants were racing up and down her arms. “I – I should not be here.”

“And yet here you are.” His green eyes gleamed in the shadowy interior. “There is no need to disguise your feelings any longer, Lady Ashburn. We’re finally alone. We can do whatever we like...as many times as we like.” He touched her face and she flinched, turning her head sharply to the side when he tried to trace the line of her jaw with his fingertip. He chuckled quietly, and the sound of his laughter was like sharp nails digging into her flesh.

Do something, she thought desperately. Say something! Don’t just stand here.

“Lord Sherwood, I – I am afraid there has been a

misunderstanding.” Her lips felt dry, cracked. She wet them with her tongue. “Please step aside so I can leave.”

Desire darkened his gaze as his stare dipped to her mouth. “I don’t think that’s really what you want.”

“It is,” she said emphatically. “It is what I want. I promise not to say anything to Scarlett. If you just let me pass—”

He grabbed her wrist and yanked. Thrown off balance, she stumbled into his chest. “Is this how you wish to play it?” he whispered against her ear. “Is this what excites you? Then so be it.” And then he shoved her backwards, onto the mattress. She tried to roll to the side, but he pinned her down with one arm while the other yanked at her skirts. He pushed them up past her thighs and dragged her drawers down below her knees, pulling so forcefully the string threaded through the waistband snapped in half.

After that everything happened quickly. At least by the measurement of time. In heartbeats, it took forever. A small eternity where Felicity could do nothing but lay there, frozen by the pain and the terror and the disbelief. Even when Rodger released her arms and stood up she continued to lay on the bed, staring blindly up at the ceiling.

There was a crack in the plaster. It was small and narrow, but given time it would begin to fester and spread. Someone really needed to mend it, she thought idly as Rodger yanked up his trousers and began to button his shirt. Before it spread to the walls. By then it would be too late.

“Do you need help getting dressed?” One golden brow lifted in

question, Rodger loomed over her. She flinched when his shadow passed over her legs.

“No.” The single word forced itself from a throat dry as dust, and she wondered where it had been when she needed it before. When he was grunting and pawing and thrusting. “No. I do not need anything from you.”

As he studied her oddly vacant expression, a frown touched the corners of Rodger’s mouth. “Perhaps I...miscalculated the depths of your affection for me.”

“Yes,” she said quietly as she sat up. “Perhaps you did.”

He watched her for a moment more, and then he shrugged. Just a small, effortless lift and fall of his shoulders. As if he were brushing away a fly. “Very well. It won’t happen again.”

She waited until he left to dress herself. With hands that weren’t quite steady she forced herself to stand, to pull up her drawers, to pull down and smooth her skirts. There was nothing she could do for her hair, and in her haste to leave, to run, to get out from the suffocatingly hot room as quickly as possible, she did not even bother to search for her missing stocking before she fled out the door and down the stairs.

Mindful of the servants, she made herself take small, measured steps. When the front door suddenly swung open and Scarlett stepped into the foyer, her cheeks still flushed from her morning ride, Felicity stopped short in the middle of the staircase.

Her stomach cramped painfully as her mouth opened and closed, then opened again. Good Lord, what was she supposed to say? What

could she say? That Rodger had just taken her by force in one of the guest bedrooms? Except that wasn't entirely true, was it? Because if he really *had* taken her by force shouldn't she have done something other than lay there? Shouldn't she have fought him off, or told him to stop, or screamed, at the very least. But she'd done none of those things.

She'd done nothing.

He had raped her, and she'd done nothing.

Scarlett's head tilted in puzzlement when she looked up and saw her friend standing on the stairs. "Felicity, what are you doing here?"

Before Felicity could explain, before she could even say one word, Rodger's booming voice rang out from the top of the stairs and the rest of her suddenly fragile world came crumbling down around her.

"Felicity you forgot your – Scarlett. I did not expect you to return from your ride so soon."

Puzzlement turned to disbelief and disbelief to stunned hurt as Scarlett's gray gaze darted between her husband and her oldest friend. "What...what are you doing here, Felicity?" she repeated, and Felicity hung her head in shame.

"I...I do not know what to say," she croaked.

"How long?" Scarlett looked up at Felicity through a thin veil of tears. "How long has – has this been going on?"

An affair.

Scarlett thought she and Rodger were having an affair.

And why wouldn't she? All of the immediate signs pointed in that direction. Why, Rodger was even holding Felicity's blue stocking in his hand. The one she'd lost after he had ripped it forcefully off her foot.

“Scarlett, please let me explain.” Desperate to make her understand, to make her see, Felicity hurried down the rest of the stairs. But when she tried to reach for Scarlett’s hand her friend snatched it away and stared at her as though she were something that had just been removed from the bottom of her shoe.

“I asked you a question. How long? A month? Two months? Longer? Tell me!”

“You do not understand—”

“Three weeks, give or take,” Rodger called down. “I am sorry you had to find out this way, my dear. It was never my intention.”

After what Rodger had already proved himself capable of the blatant lie should not have caught Felicity off guard, but it did. She shook her head, ready to refute his statement, but Scarlett was already speaking.

“No,” she said slowly. “I am sure your intention was to never be caught. How unfortunate for you that I came home before you had a chance to cover up your indiscretion.”

Still reeling from what had happened to her, Felicity was ill-prepared to defend herself. “Please,” she begged, tears rushing down her cheeks. “If you would only let me explain—”

“Explain?” Scarlett bit out scathingly. “I am not blind, Felicity. I do not need you to *explain* anything.”

“But—”

“*Get out*,” she hissed. “I never want to see you ever again.”

Felicity jerked back. “Surely you do not mean that. I will come back tomorrow after you have had time to calm yourself. Yes.” She took a

deep breath. Tomorrow. Everything would make sense tomorrow. Everything would be better tomorrow. “Yes, that is precisely what I shall do. Then we can sit down and discuss–”

“How you turned yourself into my husband’s whore?” Scarlett’s bitter laugh echoed through the foyer. “I think not. There is nothing left for us to discuss.” Her jaw clenched. “Am I somehow making myself unclear? I want you to leave and never return! If you do not leave of your own accord I shall have Givens escort you off the property.” Her gaze flicked threateningly to the butler who stood silently in front of the drawing room with his eyes averted.

When Felicity didn’t move – how could she, when her feet had adhered themselves to the floor? – Scarlett waved her arm. “Givens, come here and–”

“There is no need for that. I shall see myself out.” Feeling as though her legs were made of wood, Felicity walked stiffly past Scarlett as a footman rushed to open the door. Before she stepped outside she stopped and waited.

Waited for Rodger to admit the truth.

Waited for Scarlett to realize that she would never hurt her in such a way.

But there was only silence. Cold, damning silence. With tears in her eyes and a dagger in her heart, Felicity walked out the door.

“I DISCOVERED I WAS PREGNANT with Henry four weeks later.” As she stared into the crackling flames of the fire Felix had started when they’d entered his drawing room, Felicity absently wiped at a tear

trailing down her cheek. “Ezra and I were intimate, of course, but he was away that entire month, you see. The dates would not have made sense. So I told him about Rodger. Even then he was still hopeful Henry would be his, but when he was born with blond hair and green eyes...” She trailed off and shook her head, pulling the blanket Felix had given her more closely around her shoulders. “Our marriage was never the same after that.”

For the entirety of her story Felix had stood beside the fireplace and said not a word. The only sign that he even heard her had been the slow clenching and unclenching of his fists. But now he spoke for the first time. “This is what you’ve been hiding.”

“Yes.”

“This is what you’ve been afraid to tell me.”

She looked from the flames to Felix’s face. His jaw was as tightly clenched as she’d ever seen it, but beyond that she could not decipher what he was thinking.

When she’d told him she was ready to at long last reveal what she’d kept buried, both from him and from herself, they’d gone directly to his townhouse. She’d barely had time to admire the ruggedly masculine décor before he’d directed her to sit on a sturdy camelback sofa, put a glass of scotch in both of their hands, and retreated to the fireplace. She hadn’t known if the distance was for his benefit or her own, but by the time she’d gotten halfway through the retelling she was grateful for the space between them.

If gave her room to breathe. Room to think. Room to gauge – or at least attempt to gauge – his mood.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Why?” The three-letter question filled the entire room.

Dropping her gaze to her lap, Felicity tried to answer as honestly as she could. “There were several reasons, I suppose. The first being that it was – is – still painful for me to think about it, let alone speak of it out loud. Scarlett and Ezra were the only ones who knew, and they would never say anything. I thought if enough time went by it would simply...go away. Almost as if it had never happened at all.” She smoothed her hand over the blanket. “And because I was afraid it would make you think of me differently.”

Felix inhaled sharply. “Why would ye ever think that?”

“Because it made me think of *myself* differently. Before it happened...before it happened I was so sure of everything. I knew who I was. I knew what I was doing. Where I was going. But after it happened, everything changed. *I* changed. I was no longer the same woman I’d been.” The blanket fell away as she stood up. “I tried to pretend. Every time Ezra visited my bedchamber I tried so hard but I couldn’t...I couldn’t *do* anything. Just like I couldn’t do anything when Rodger held me down on the mattress.”

“It wasn’t your fault. What that bastard did to ye, it wasn’t your fault.”

“I know that,” she said, but they both detected the uncertainty in her voice. “But if I’d tried harder to stop him–”

“He raped ye,” Felix said flatly, and even though Felicity flinched from the harshness of the word she was grateful he’d said it, for no one else ever had. Certainly not Rodger. Nor Ezra. Nor even Scarlett.

They'd acknowledged what had happened to her. With the exception of Rodger, they'd sympathized. But they'd never *said* it. Not like that.

"There was nothing ye could have done," Felix continued, "because ye weren't the one in control. He was. And he used his control to take what didn't belong to him. And it was wrong, and vile, and if he were still breathing I'd choke the life out of him with my own bare hands." The flames from the hearth paled in comparison to the wrathful fire burning in his gaze. "And I'd enjoy every bloody second of it."

"But he's dead," she said softly.

"Aye, that he is. But that doesn't mean what he did to ye died along with him."

Felix was right. Rodger may have been gone, but what he'd done to her had not disappeared. It would always be a part of her. And she could either continue to ignore it and hope it went away...or she could acknowledge it and move forward.

"It truly does not matter to you?" she whispered.

"No." A lock of hair tumbled across his brow when he angled his head. "I knew ye were beautiful. Smart as a whip. Kind. A good mother. But I never knew how strong ye were until this moment. Ye are the strongest woman I've ever met and it's my privilege to be in love with ye."

"Oh Felix." It was the first she'd ever used his Christian name. Tears filled her eyes, blurring her vision as she ran into his arms. He hugged her tight against his chest and held her while she cried. When she was finished and the last tear had finally been purged, she used his handkerchief to wipe her face.

“There now love,” he murmured, stroking her back. “Do ye feel better?”

“Yes.” And she did, Felicity realized. For she was finally free of the burden she’d been carrying for seven long years. A burden that had become so much a part of her that she hadn’t even realized how heavy it had gotten, nor how draining it had been on her soul. “There is only one more thing...”

Felix kissed her brow. “There always is with ye. Out with it, then. I’ll have no more secrets between us.”

Unable to meet his gaze, she bit her lip and stared at a button on his waistcoat. “I do not know if I will be able to be...intimate with you.” A blush spread across her cheeks. “At least not in the manner you are accustomed.”

“Why don’t yet let me worry about that, love.”

“Yes, but—”

“Come sit by the fire.” Keeping an arm around her waist, he guided her gently but firmly to the stone hearth where the fire slowly smoldered. Spreading out a thick fur blanket on the floor, he sat down first and then pulled her onto his lap. After a moment’s hesitation she relaxed against him, her spine curving into the hard line of his body as her head lolled against his chest. She felt his abdomen clench when she rested her hands on his thighs, but he did not press for more than she was ready to give. Instead he began to massage her shoulders, fingers sinking into knotted muscle and coiled sinew until she sighed and closed her eyes.

Sleep came quickly for her, and she did not fight it. Warm, drowsy,

and loved, she sank blissfully into slumber.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

WHEN FELICITY WOKE it was not yet dawn, and she did not recognize the room she was in. Startled, she jerked upright, her hands instinctively sweeping out to the side.

“Bloody ‘ell,” Felix grunted when she caught him square in the mouth. “I know ye’ve gotten a taste for violence, but next time jest give me a shake.”

“I’m sorry.” Immediately contrite, she folded her arms over her belly. “I did not know where I was.”

“In my bedchamber.” Twisting to the side, he fumbled to light a small oil lamp before he sat back on his elbows and regarded her with the faint tracings of a frown. “Ye fell asleep in front of the fire and I didn’t want ye to get a crick in your neck.” He flexed his jaw. “Although given your newfound penchant for punching I may be inclined just to leave ye there next time.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“Aye, that ye did. By ye know what they say.” Beneath a tousled hank of tawny hair his eyes lit with a rakish gleam. “Nothing says sorry like a kiss.”

Her gaze inadvertently dipped to his chest, and she let out a loud gasp and covered her eyes with her hands. “Mr. Spencer! You – you are not wearing any clothes.”

He lifted the blanket. "I'm wearing my drawers. See?"

Felicity certainly *did* see. Peeking through her fingers, she saw a taut stomach lined with muscle and a black arrow of hair leading straight down to a pair of white cotton drawers so short they might as well have been nonexistent. In the soft glow of the lamp his skin was the same dusky gold as his eyes and it was with marked difficulty that she managed to wrench her gaze away.

"A pair of drawers hardly constitutes clothing," she said with a prudish sniff.

"I've all the important bits covered, haven't I?" Claspng his hands together behind his neck, he fell back onto his pillow. "And I left ye fully dressed."

That he had. With the exception of her cloak, shoes, and missing gloves, she still had on everything she'd worn to the theater, including her heavy blue gown, now wrinkled beyond repair.

"Do you know what time it is?" she asked, glancing out the window. The double curtains were tied open with satin cord, affording a glimpse of a small courtyard below where everything was still and dark.

"An hour or two shy of sunrise, if I had to hazard a guess." His gaze steady and unblinking, he said, "Do ye want me to escort ye home, Miss Atwood?"

"No." She returned his stare, her expression solemn even as her heart began to race and heat warmed her belly. "No, I don't."

His eyes darkened with awareness. "What is it ye want, then?"

What *did* she want? Now that Felix knew her deepest, darkest secret

– and it had done nothing but strengthen the love he felt for her – what did she really want? For him. For herself. For them both.

“You,” she said without hesitation. “I want you.”

“Ah, love,” he groaned. “Do ye know how long I’ve been waiting for ye to say those words?”

“Nearly as long as I’ve been waiting to say them, I imagine.” Yet despite her desire, she couldn’t help but feel a prickling of bashfulness. What if she did not meet Felix’s expectations? He’d said to let him worry about it, but how could she possibly do anything *except* worry? Grasping the blanket, she pulled it up to her chin as she sank lower into the bed. “It – it has been a very long time. I do not know what I’m supposed to do.”

“Nothing.” He angled his body towards her and brushed a curl back behind her ear. “Just enjoy it, and if at any point ye want me to stop ye just say the word.” His mouth curved in a wolfish smile. “Even though I can promise ye that stopping will be the furthest thing from your mind.”

He began by kissing her. Just a soft, lingering brush of his lips across her lips. She attempted to kiss him back, but the self-doubt rushing through her head made her stiff and clumsy. Their noses bumped, then their teeth. Miserable and embarrassed she started to turn away, but Felix merely slid his hand behind her neck and deepened the kiss until she wasn’t thinking, she was only feeling.

The blanket slid out of her grasp and fell to her waist when he began to nibble at her ear, and her head fell back onto the pillow when his mouth skimmed down her throat. She did not panic when he

began to tug at the bodice of her gown. Instead she rolled onto her side so he could pull at the stays, and then sat up with her legs dangling over the edge of the bed so he could peel her dress and chemise from her quivering body.

When her clothes were piled on the floor in a heap of satin and silk, he rose to his knees behind her and brought his hands around to her front, cupping her breasts and gently flicking his thumbs across her hard, pointed nipples.

A spark of bright, brilliant heat ignited between her thighs and on a throaty sigh she tilted her head back, sending her dark hair spilling across Felix's bare chest. He kissed her throat. Her shoulder. When he twisted her around and kissed her mouth she yielded beneath the pressure of his tongue, and welcomed more heat as he slowly lowered her onto the mattress.

Pillows and blankets were pushed mindlessly aside. She arched her spine on a sharp, thrilled gasp as he drew first one aching nipple between his teeth and then the other, suckling and teasing until her gasp became a muffled cry.

Her body burned with need wherever he touched her, and when he kissed her on the lips it was her fingers buried in his hair that dragged him there. He shifted his weight, sliding a leg across her silken thighs. His tongue swirled inside her mouth, tasting, possessing, claiming her with every stroke.

When his hand eventually found its way down to the curls that guarded her womanhood she did not even think of resisting. Nor did she lay passively beneath him as he dipped a single fingertip into the

honeyed depths of her core, but rather dug her nails into the clenched muscles of his back and urged him on with tiny whimpers of pleasure.

She'd never felt sensations like these before. It was like feeling the warmth of the sun for the very first time. Or looking up at a midnight sky and seeing it lit with a million stars.

Every kiss was new. Every touch held meaning. Every glide of his finger in and out of her body brought her closer to a precipice she'd never even known existed.

He murmured wickedly carnal things in her ear as he mounted her, and with each word spoken her desire heightened until she was throbbing with need. All but sobbing with it. And then he was inside her, his long, hard length filling her, and she was clinging to him, and he was kissing her, and on the same desperate breath they both plunged over the cliff into stunning oblivion.

"I SAW YE BEFORE I EVER MET YE." Dawn was just breaking across the horizon as Felix toyed with a silky lock of Felicity's hair. She laid tucked into the crook of his arm with her eyes closed and one slender arm thrown across his chest. "Did I ever tell ye that?"

"No." She blinked drowsily up at him. "When?"

"Eight years ago at a ball."

"Eight years ago..." Her eyes became more alert and he could all but see that quick mind of hers ticking back through the years. "That would have been before I was even married." She frowned. "How did you know it was me?"

"Do ye really think I would ever forget this face?" He leaned down,

nuzzled the side of her neck. But when his ardor stirred and he licked her earlobe the arm over his chest became noticeably heavier.

“Wait,” she protested, pushing him back when he would have begun nibbling along her collarbone.

“Wait?” he smirked. “That’s not what ye were saying ten minutes ago.”

She gave him a withering look before she sat up. “Where are all the blankets?”

“Dunno,” he said cheerfully as his gaze skimmed unabashedly across her naked breasts. “But I can’t say as I’m going to be looking for them anytime soon.”

Bloody ‘ell, but the woman was a vision. All long, graceful limbs and ivory skin still flushed red in places from their lovemaking. Her hair was tangled around her shoulders, the pins scattered across the floor. She was a mermaid brought to life. A fairy queen coaxed from the woodlands. A goddess descended from the heavens above.

“I cannot sit here in the *nude*,” she said, glaring at him as she hunched forward over her thighs and looped her arms around her bent knees. “It is not seemly.”

Felix did not bother to contain his snort. “What difference does it make if ye have on ten dresses or none a’tall? I’ve already seen every inch of ye.”

“But that was when it was *dark*.” She looked past him out the window to where the sun was slowly rising into a dull, gray sky. “It is daytime now. Or nearly.”

“I’ll let ye in on a secret, love.” Leaning towards her, he angled his

head and said in a conspiratorial whisper, “I have *excellent* night vision.”

Her sigh was long and suffering, but she couldn’t quite disguise the amused twitch of her lips. “Have it your way, then. But I must know... what were *you* doing at a ball?”

“I was looking at Lady Dunmore’s jewelry.”

“*Looking* at it? Or stealing it?”

“Just taking a look.” His mouth stretched in a sly grin. “And maybe tucking a few of the finer pieces in my pocket for a rainy day.”

“*Mr.* Spencer!”

“*Miss* Atwood.”

“You really are incorrigible, aren’t you?”

He stroked a finger along her bare arm. “I can show you just how incorrigible I am right now if ye’d like.”

She ignored him. “I remember that ball. It was one of the first ones I ever attended. You really saw me there?”

“Aye. I was on my way out the door when I caught sight of ye across the room. Four dozen women and my eyes went straight to you.”

“I find that rather hard to believe.”

“Ye had on a white dress.”

“*All* of the debutantes were wearing white,” she pointed out.

“Ye had on a white dress,” he continued, undeterred by her skepticism, “with little pink roses on the sleeves and your hair was piled up on top of your head. Ye were wearing pearl earrings. And ye were the loveliest girl there.”

“You – you really *did* see me all those years ago.” She looked at him with amazement. “I can hardly believe it. Why didn’t you tell me before?”

Felix shrugged. “I suppose I was waiting for the right moment. And this seemed to be it.”

“I cannot believe our paths crossed all those years ago.” She shook her head. “How odd.”

“Ye can call it odd if ye like, but I prefer to think of it as fate.”

“Do you?”

“Aye.” Bracing his hands on the mattress, he leaned forward again and kissed her nose before he stood up. The last thing he wanted to do was leave Felicity – especially when she was naked in his bed – but his presence was required on Bow Street and he was already late. With the Slasher still on the loose the Captain was requiring all of his men to pull double shifts and he’d begun cracking down on tardiness. If Felix did not get moving quickly he was going to arrive just in time to receive a blustering reprimand. “Ye never stood a chance when it came to me, love.”

He felt Felicity watching him as he pulled a clean pair of trousers out of an antique chest of drawers and a linen shirt out of his closet. Dressing without fanfare, he splashed cold water on his face from a washbasin in the corner of the room before sitting down in a chair to pull on his socks and boots.

“Stay here for as long as ye like. When ye are ready to go there will be a hackney waiting outside.”

“I wish you did not have to leave,” Felicity said wistfully. “I wish – I

wish this moment could go on forever. The both of us. Here. Isolated from the rest of the world. Although I do rather miss Henry and Anne.” Her pretty brow creased. “I’ve never been away from them before for more than a few hours.”

“It’s early yet. I’ve no doubt they’re still fast asleep dreaming of sugar plums and kittens.”

“Kittens? Why would they be dreaming of kittens?” Taking note of Felix’s guilty expression, her eyes narrowed with suspicion. “Mr. Spencer, what did you do?”

He rose from the chair and unhooked his coat from the back of the door. “I haven’t the faintest idea,” he said evasively.

“Mr. Spencer...”

The woman was like a bloody dog with a bone. Were their genders reversed, she would have made a damn fine Runner. “I may have promised them a kitten.”

“Mr. Spencer!”

“Each,” he muttered.

“A kitten *each*?” Felicity’s brows shot up. “Without consulting me first?”

“In my defense, they’re sneaky little buggers.” And when they’d looked up at him with their big eyes and innocent smiles, how could any man on earth not be expected to give them whatever it was their little hearts desired? If they’d asked him for a stable filled with prancing gray ponies he would have found a way to make it possible. Because he’d not only loved Felicity. Somehow along the way he’d fallen in love with Henry and Anne as well.

It was a different sort of love than what he felt for their mother. It was warm. Protective. Paternal. He loved them as if they were his own blood, and if they wanted the moon he would happily drag it down for them. Compared to a celestial orb that controlled the tides, two kittens were *hardly* a lot to ask for.

“A friend of mine has an entire litter, born just last week.” He slid his arms through the sleeves of his jacket and pulled it snug around his shoulders. “They’ll be ready to go by the end of the month. The children can have their pick.”

“You really should have asked me first.” Felicity frowned at him over her knees. “Now I am going to be the one who has to disappoint them when I tell them they cannot have the kittens.”

“And why would ye go and do a foolish thing like that?”

“Because there is hardly enough room in my mother’s house as it is!” A lock of hair flew up in the air when she huffed out an impatient breath. “Not to mention Mr. Darcy is quite content being the only pet.”

“Which is why the kittens are going to live here.” He leaned back against the door and slid his hands into the pockets of his trousers. *Like shooting fish in a barrel*, he thought smugly. This was precisely the opening he’d been looking for.

“Why would – can you hand me a blanket, please?” Exasperation sparked in her eyes. “I cannot have a serious conversation while I am devoid of clothing.”

“Those are my favorite sort of conversations to have,” Felix said with a wicked grin, but he went to the closet and pulled out a thin

cotton blanket in soft blue. God only knew where the first one had gone. Under the bed, most likely, or it had burned up from all of the heat they'd made between them.

The devil knew he had slept with more adventurous women. More experienced women. More daring women. But not a single one of them had ever set his blood on fire and put stars in his eyes like the way Felicity had. From the first kiss to the last he'd been a man possessed, and even though their sweat was not yet dry on the sheets he wanted her again. He would *always* want her. And he was determined to ensure he always had her.

Fashioning the blanket around her slender body as though it were a Grecian toga, Felicity padded barefoot to the window and peered out through the glass. "You've a lovely view of the courtyard."

"Aye," he said impatiently. "About the kittens—"

"If you really want to keep them here, there is nothing I can do to stop you. My parents had one once. A stray they made the mistake of feeding, thinking it would go away." She turned away from the window with curved lips. "It lived quite happily in my father's study for the next seven years. Although it was rather destructive on occasion. And that was just one cat. I cannot imagine what two would be capable of."

"I'm sure the children will keep them busy."

"Yes, when they come to visit. But they will not be here all of the time." Her smile faded and was replaced by a frown. "It does not sound as though you've thought this out very well, Mr. Spencer. Animals, even small ones, are a very large responsibility."

If only she knew how *much* he'd been thinking about it.

"What if Henry and Anne were here all of the time?" The floorboards creaked beneath the weight of his heavy boots as he crossed the room and gently took her hands. Squeezing, he looked down at her in earnest. "What if they lived here?"

Felicity looked up at him blankly. "Without me? Mr. Spencer, I have no intention—"

"You'd live here as well." For a woman with such a quick, clever mind she could be terribly dense. "I want ye to marry me. I want ye to marry me, and live here with me, and share your life with me."

Her cheeks paled. "Are you – are you proposing marriage, Mr. Spencer?"

"No."

"No?" she said, confused. "But you just said—"

"I'm tellin' ye that I am *going* to ask ye to marry me and live here with me and share your life with me. I thought I'd give ye time to get used to the idea first."

"Because you think I am going to decline?"

Felix snorted. "Because I *know* ye are going to decline. Just as I know that I'll eventually wear ye down. At least this way I've given myself a bit of an advantage." He glanced out the window. The sun was rising higher by the minute. He should have left for Bow Street half an hour ago. The Captain was going to have his head. "I've really got to leave, love. But if ye want, I can come calling on ye this evening."

She hesitated. Bit her lip. Looked down at her bare toes peeking out

from beneath the hem of the blanket. “Yes,” she said softly, and Felix released the breath he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding. “Yes, I should like that very much.”

Hands diving into her tangled mane he kissed her, hard and fierce and long. The sort of kiss that would carry them both through the day until they saw one another again. When it was finished he cupped her jaw and drank in every blessed, beautiful inch of her flawless countenance. “Tell the little ankle biters to mind their mother.”

“I will,” Felicity said dazedly.

Knowing if he lingered another second longer he wouldn’t be able to leave, Felix gave her one last kiss before he left his bedroom, and the woman he loved.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FELICITY TOOK HER TIME GETTING DRESSED. Humming a little ditty, she smoothed out the wrinkles in her gown the best she could, combed her hair with her fingers, and used the washbasin to clean her face and hands.

There was a small looking glass above the basin hanging from a leather string and her reflection caught her off guard. Gone was the carefully polished debutante with nary a single curl out of order. In her place was a heavy lidded siren with swollen lips and flushed cheeks and a gleam in her eyes that only came from being thoroughly loved.

The things Felix had done to her... She trembled just to think of them. He had played her body as if it were the finest of instruments, and he a grand musician. He'd pulled on strings no other man had ever touched. Pressed down on keys she hadn't even known existed. He had loved her thoroughly. Completely. And not once, not a single time, had she felt a stab of ice in her belly or fear in her heart or panic in her breast. It had been perfect. *He* had been perfect. And now he wanted to marry her.

Felicity would be lying if she said the thought had not crossed her mind. There were things to consider, of course. There always were. But the short of it was she *did* want to marry him. To live here with

him. To raise Henry and Anne with him. To maybe, one day, have a child with him.

“Yes,” she said aloud, and the single word filled her with so much bubbling elation that she actually jumped in the air and clapped her hands together. “Yes, Felix Spencer, I *will* marry you.”

That’s what I shall say, she thought giddily as she made her way downstairs. *That is exactly what I shall say when he asks me.*

Tempted by a healthy dose of curiosity, she snuck a peek into every room she passed. Surely it wasn’t prying if the doors were open and most of them were, affording her brief glimpses at a side of Felix she’d not yet had an opportunity to see.

The townhouse was sparsely decorated and the furniture a tad masculine for her taste, but everything was sturdily built and impeccably clean with just enough personal touches to give her an idea of what caught his eye. Things would have to be rearranged, of course. The cabinet in the front parlor would need to be moved and she simply could not abide velvet curtains. But the townhouse had all the makings of a wonderful home. A home where she and Felix and Henry and Anne could love and live and grow as a family.

She drew her cloak over her shoulders before she opened the front door. Fog had overtaken the sun, and a few drops of rain hit the top of her head as she hurried out to the edge of the street where a lone hackney was waiting.

“I am sorry to have kept you,” she apologized to the driver, a nondescript man with a long face and lanky build. He had a cap pulled down low over his eyes so only the lower half of his face was

visible.

“Not a problem, mum.” He waited until she’d settled herself on the bench seat before he asked, “Where is it I’m takin’ ye?”

“Gracechurch Street and West, please.”

She hoped they arrived before the children woke, for she did not know how she would explain her absence. Although if she was being truthful, it was not Henry and Anne she was the most concerned about. It was Mrs. Atwood.

How *did* one explain to their mother they’d spent the night in the arms of a man? *Some things*, she decided as the carriage lurched forward, *are better left unspoken*.

Given the hour and the rain, traffic was heavy in the middle of Town, and so when the driver turned the hackney left instead of right she presumed he was taking a shortcut. It wasn’t until they emerged on the edge of the textile district that she felt the first stirrings of alarm.

Bordering the East End, the textile district was comprised of sprawling brick factories with dingy windows and enormous chimneys that continuously spewed out thick streams of black smoke. It was a filthy, disease-ridden place with broken glass in the streets and a gin bottle on every corner. Felicity had read horrible stories and seen heart-wrenching drawings of the working conditions women and children were forced to endure in the factories. In short, it was not somewhere she wanted to be.

“Excuse me.” Half standing out of her seat, she wrapped her fist against the small window separating herself from the driver. From this

angle she could only see his back, and he did not so much as turn around. She raised her voice. "Excuse me! I believe you've taken a wrong turn!"

There was no response.

Wide-eyed, Felicity sat back and gripped the edge of her seat. What was the driver doing? Better yet, where was he *going*? Gracechurch Street was at least ten blocks in the opposite direction. He had not brought her here by accident.

The hackney turned down a narrow alley and came to a sudden stop. She breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe the driver was new to London and he'd merely gotten confused by all the different streets and thoroughfares. But he did not look very confused when he yanked open the door.

"Get out," he snarled.

Instinctively moving to the furthest edge of the seat, she shook her head. "No. Absolutely not. You're supposed to take me to my mother's."

"Plans 'ave changed." He braced his hands on either side of the door. "Now ye are goin' to get out, or I'm going to pull ye out."

"I am not moving from this carriage," she said stiffly.

He shrugged. "Have it yer way, then."

Felicity's screams ricocheted off the walls of the alley when she was dragged from the hackney, but if anyone heard they did not care. The East End was a place where cries for help went unanswered, and there was no hope to be found for the hopeful.

"You're goin' to give me a bleedin' headache." Easily overpowering

her – the driver was surprisingly strong for someone so lanky – he shoved a foul-smelling gag in her mouth and tied her wrists behind her back with a rough piece of twine. Her eyes teared, nostrils flaring as she struggled to draw in enough air to satisfy her burning lungs. Grabbing her by the arm, he marched her to a cast iron door at the far end of the alley. Withdrawing a key from his pocket, he inserted it into the lock and the door swung open.

Felicity caught only a glimpse of the small, windowless room before he shoved her inside with so much force that she fell to her knees. By the time she managed to right herself he had slammed the door shut, and she screamed into the gag when she heard the distinctive *click* of the lock falling into place.

She was trapped.

FELIX SIPPED FROM A MUG OF COFFEE long gone cold and listened intently while the Captain assigned new areas of London for them to hunt for the Slasher. Or at least he pretended to listen intently. His body may have been at Bow Street, but his mind was still in his bedroom.

“...searched the docks to no avail...”

By now Felicity was at her mother’s, but for the sake of his imagination she was still sprawled on his bed, the blanket he’d given her riding high on her hips, revealing the creamy swell of one buttock and the tops of her breasts. She looked up at him when he entered the room, a catlike smile curving her lush mouth as she beckoned him towards her with a sultry crook of her finger. Her lips parted...

“We need to start concentrating our efforts on Mayfair.”

Mayfair? There was nothing the least bit sensual about Mayfair.

“Hargrave and Brentwood will take Grosvenor Square,” the Captain continued. “The people there will be more willing to talk to their fellow peers. I want Hawke and Ferguson to do another patrol of White’s. Someone there has to know something.”

“Which one?” Colin and Ian said together.

“Ian,” the Captain decided after a pause. “Colin, you’re with Spencer.

“And where is it we’re going?” Felix drawled, setting down his coffee and tipping back in his chair.

“Harper Street.”

Grant snorted. “You’re sending *him* to the financial district? Might as well tell the banks to empty their coffers now.”

“Sod off, Hargrave.” Felix slanted the second-in-command a narrow-eyed glare. “It’s too early in the morning for your shite.”

“Late night at the theater?” Grant queried, lifting a brow.

“That’s none of your bloody business.”

Grant just grinned. “Touchy, are we? Wouldn’t have something to do with a certain brunette now, would it?”

Felix stiffened. “I said sod off.”

“That is enough.” Owen’s sharp voice reverberated around the room, and everyone instantly fell silent. “We have enough to worry about without squabbling amongst ourselves. Not to mention the brunette to whom you are referring, Hargrave, is a close personal friend of mine. I will not have her name brought up here again. Are

we clear?”

“As crystal,” Grant said easily, but the amused glance he slid at Felix revealed the ribbing between them was far from over.

“Good. Now there is one last order of—”

“Excuse me.” As if conjured by magic, Dorothea Atwood appeared in the doorway. “I knocked, but the only one who answered was this cat.” Purring loudly, Mrs. Wadsworth slid past her skirts and jumped onto the table.

“Mrs. Atwood.” Felix stood up quickly as did the rest of the runners, the legs of their chairs scraping loudly on the floorboards. “Is everything all right?”

“Oh good, I was hoping you would be here.” Waving a fretful hand in front of her face, she drew a deep breath and said, “It’s Felicity. She has gone missing.”

FELICITY DID NOT KNOW HOW LONG she sat in the dark and the damp. Long enough for her tears to dry on her cheeks and her arms and legs to go numb. Long enough for her to imagine a hundred ways she was going to be killed. Long enough to grow thirsty, and hungry, and cold.

She jumped at the sound of a key turning in the lock. Then cringed and closed her eyes when a man carrying a bright lantern stepped through the door.

He closed it behind him. Took care to lock it. Fearing the worst she trembled when he approached her and tried to turn her head to the side when she felt the brush of his gloved hand against her chin, but

the only thing he did was rip her gag out before backing away.

Working her jaw, she waited for her eyes to adjust to the influx of light. And when she was finally able to see who was towering over her she couldn't contain her gasp of shock.

"You. You are the one behind this? You are the reason I am here? Why?"

"I think it should be obvious." Setting the lantern down on the floor, Ezra straightened and looked down at her with the same vaguely disapproving expression he'd worn for the majority of their marriage. "Your recent antics have brought my wife and I a great deal of embarrassment."

Even though her legs screamed in protest, Felicity forced herself to her feet. She'd be damned if she cowered before anyone, least of all her spineless excuse for a husband.

"So you had me *kidnapped*?" she said incredulously.

Ezra frowned. "Do not be dramatic, Felicity. It is unbecoming."

How, she wondered as she stared at him in disbelief. How had she ever married him? How had she ever loved him? Had she truly be so blind? Or just naïve?

"I was brought here against my will!" she cried. "I had my hands tied behind my back and a foul-smelling rag stuffed in my mouth and I have been locked in here for God only knows how long. That is not being dramatic. That is abduction!"

"I apologize if you have suffered needlessly."

"You can hang your apology," she said, borrowing one of Felix's favorite phrases. "I do not want it and I do not need it. What I *need* is

for you to open that door and release me. Well?” she said expectantly when Ezra just continued to stand there, looking ridiculously overdressed for a kidnapping in his top hat and white cravat and long tailcoat. “What are you waiting for?”

“I am sorry, Felicity.” His gaze lowered. “Truly I am.”

“Ezra, open the door.”

“Why couldn’t you have remained in the country? If you’d remained in the country, none of this would have had to happen. I have a reputation to uphold. And I will not allow you to besmirch it with your wanton ways. Not this time. Not again.”

“Ezra.” She felt the bitter, familiar taste of panic on her tongue when she saw his hand slide into the inside pocket of his waistcoat.

“Ezra, please open the door.”

He lifted his gaze and looked her straight in the eye as he pulled out a small silver pistol. “I think we both know I am not going to do that.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“I WANT LONDON TORN APART. I want that bloody hackney found. *Now!*” More savage wolf than man, Felix stormed out of Bow Street with Owen hot on his heels. Helpless to do anything but wait, Mrs. Atwood stayed behind, hands clasped to her breast as she sent up a fervent prayer for her daughter’s safe return.

She’d known something was wrong the minute the children had woken and Felicity was still not home. Leaving Henry and Anne with her neighbor, a sweet elderly woman with enough breakables to keep them entertained for the rest of the day, she had gone straight to Bow Street. Straight to Felix.

Part of her had hoped she would see her daughter when she opened the door, but all of that hope vanished in an instant when she saw the fear in Felix’s eyes.

“What do you mean she’s gone missing?” he’d demanded. “It’s nearly ten o’clock. She should have returned over an hour ago.”

“Well I can assure you she did not.”

“She’s still at my townhouse, then.”

But Mrs. Atwood had been able to tell by the look in his eyes that he did not really believe that, and neither did she.

Oh my darling girl, she thought silently, watching through the front

window as Felix and the Captain mounted their horses and tore off down the street in a wild clatter of hooves. *Please come back to me.*

FELICITY STARED AT THE GUN IN HORROR. “Ezra, what are you doing?”

“What I should have done instead of divorcing you.” A thin sheen of perspiration marred his brow. Holding the gun in one hand, he used the other to dab at his forehead with a white silk handkerchief.

Both hands trembled.

“You were supposed to be well behaved. You were supposed to be a *lady*. But you brought shame to yourself. You brought shame to me. You brought shame to our marriage!”

“I did nothing of the sort.” The woman Felicity used to be would have been the very picture of contriteness. The woman who had dutifully sat in the House of Lords with her head bowed and her hands clutched together while her character was torn asunder would have dropped to her knees and begged for forgiveness. But that woman was gone. And she was never coming back. “I was a good wife to you, Ezra. Better than you ever deserved. If there is anyone who should be ashamed, it is you. *You* had an affair. *You* wanted a divorce. *You* threw your wife and children out the door with nothing more than the clothes on their backs.”

“Because of that bastard son you bore! Do you know I was laughed out of White’s? They said you made a cuckold out of me!”

“You know that is not true,” she said evenly. “You know what really happened.”

“But they didn’t! I was *laughed* at.” His eyes glittered in the darkness. Not with madness. Felicity knew what madness looked like, and this was not it. This was pride and desperation. This was a man who thought he’d lost everything, and was willing to do anything to get it back.

“And then you divorced me and you remarried. It is over, Ezra. It has been over for a long time. Why are you doing this now?”

“Because they’re whispering again!” He gesticulated wildly with his arms and the gun jerked, causing Felicity to flinch and duck. “They’re gossiping, again. They’re laughing, again! You should have gone away. Why couldn’t you have just gone away? Instead you’ve been parading yourself all over London. With a *commoner*!” A vein bulged in his forehead. “You *slapped* Lady Manheim!”

“She deserved it.”

“What happened to you?” he whispered. “You were so perfect. So ladylike.”

“I think obedient is the word you are looking for. I was obedient. Like a dog or a horse or a well-trained cat. But I am not the same person I was, Ezra. And neither are you.” She should have been repulsed by him. She should have been afraid. But as she looked at him, a small, desperate man clinging to desperate things, the only thing she felt was pity. “Does the opinion of others mean so much to you that you would take another person’s life? Because the only thing murdering me will do is put you in Newgate.” *If Felix doesn’t kill you first*, she thought silently.

Oh Felix. And Henry. And little Anne. Her chest tightened. What if

she never saw them again?

No, she told herself fiercely when she felt tears prick the corners of her eyes. *You cannot afford to think like that. Felix said you were the strongest woman he has ever known, and you need to use that strength now.*

“Put the gun down, untie my hands, and open the door. Let me go. Let me go, and this will all be over.”

“So you can return to the theater and cause another scene?” His mouth curled back in a sneer. “I think not! This ends here. I will not have you tied around my neck for the rest of my life.”

“Is that where you think I’ve been? Around your neck?” She shook her head. “That is your own guilt, Ezra. And the only one to blame for it is yourself.”

“No.” He lifted the gun. Pointed it at her heart. “No, you’re wrong. When you’re gone, they’ll stop laughing. When you’re gone, my reputation will be restored. When you’re gone, I will finally have peace.”

“Ezra, wait—”

He pulled the trigger.

FELIX RODE AS IF THE DEMONS of hell were nipping at his heels. Even Owen, an adept equestrian in his own right, could not keep up with him as he galloped through the Mayfair District, sending carriages veering off course and bystanders scattering in all directions.

He dismounted before his horse had come to a full halt, and did not bother to knock before he threw open the door to 374 Beacon Lane

and stormed inside.

“Sir! Sir, you cannot be in here!” An alarmed butler came rushing into the foyer. One glance at Felix’s thunderous expression and he stopped dead in his tracks. “How – how can I help you, sir?”

“Ashburn.” Felix all but spit the name. “Where is he?”

“I – I am afraid I do not – ahhh!” the butler yelled when Felix grabbed him by the lapels of his black uniform and shoved him against the wall.

“Where. Is. Ashburn,” he gritted out between clenched teeth, golden eyes feral in their intensity.

“Spencer, unhand the butler.” Stepping through the open doorway, Owen assessed the situation in one passing glance. “How do you know Ashburn even has her?”

“Because I know.”

It wasn’t an answer, but it was good enough for Owen. Spencer’s gut was one of the things he valued most about him. If he thought Ashburn was involved, then Ashburn was involved.

“Where is your employer?” he asked the white-faced butler. “It would behoove you to answer honestly. And quickly.”

“I do not – all right,” he gasped when Felix growled. “All right. Lord Ashburn left rather unexpectedly two hours ago.”

Almost exactly the same time Felicity would have gotten into the hackney. *If* she’d gotten into the hackney. Felix’s hands clenched into fists.

“Where was he going?”

“I am not certain. But! But,” he said hurriedly when Felix took a

menacing step towards him, “Lady Ashburn may know. She is generally privy to all of her husband’s comings and goings. If you would f-follow me.” He led them directly to her dressing chamber. She was in the midst of having her hair curled with long silver tongs, and her mouth dropped open with outrage when Felix and Owen piled into the room.

“What is the meaning of this?” she demanded. A pale, watery-eyed blonde with a distracting mole above the left side of her mouth, Lady Ashburn was no great beauty. But she did come from an impeccable bloodline. “Get out at once!”

“We apologize for the intrusion,” Owen began.

“Your husband,” Felix interrupted. “Where is he?”

He could not say with any real conviction *why* he knew Ashburn had taken Felicity. There was certainly no evidence, nor any witnesses. But he felt it. In his bones, he felt that Ashburn was involved and that he was on the verge of doing something dire – if he hadn’t already.

“Ezra?” Lady Ashburn waved her maid out of the room with a flick of her wrist. “What do you want with Ezra?”

His head on a bloody platter if he’s harmed one hair on Felicity’s head.

“Lord Ashburn’s first wife has gone missing,” said Owen.

Lady Ashburn’s gaze shifted to the Captain. “And you think my husband has something to do with it?”

“We do.”

Her lips pursed. “He has seemed rather...unsettled as of late. I never really thought anything of it, but now that you mention Miss Atwood

it does seem rather odd...”

“What?” Felix’s jaw clenched. “What does?”

“Well, it’s just that he has suddenly become very interested in textiles. I do not see what it would have to do with his first wife, but he did mention he was going to tour one of the factories this morning.”

“A factory in the East End?”

Lady Ashburn rolled her eyes. “But of course. Where *else* would a factory be? Now if you would excuse me, I really need to finish getting ready. I have a luncheon at noon.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

FELICITY WAS LIMPING out of the alley when Felix came barreling in. He stopped short at the sight of her, and then he was running and she was running – or rather, trying to run – and they were in each other's arms.

“Felicity. Felicity.” He said her name like a prayer, over and over again, until she was finally forced to press her fingers to his lips.

“I am all right. It's all right.”

He took a deep, shuddering breath and searched her face. “I thought...”

“I know.” Rising up on her toes, she kissed his stubbly cheek. “I know.”

“Are ye hurt?” Grasping her by the shoulders, he set her back away from him as his gaze swept down her body. She could only imagine what he was seeing. After sitting in the dark, dingy room she was covered in dirt and soot and heaven only knew what else. Her hair had come loose from its braid and hung down over her shoulders in a great tangled heap. There was a rip in her skirt and her cloak trailed behind her, the hem dirtied beyond repair. “Did he hurt ye?”

“So you know it was Ezra then,” she murmured.

Felix nodded grimly. “I had a feeling. A gut instinct. Are ye–”

“He did not hurt me.” Her mouth thinned. “Although not for lack of trying.”

When Ezra had lifted the pistol and pulled the trigger she’d thought she was going to die. But then the gun had clicked empty, and she’d realized what Ezra had not – the idiot had forgotten to put bullets in the chamber. Taking advantage of his temporary confusion she’d launched herself at him and by sheer dumb luck he had struck his head against the wall when he fell, rendering himself completely and utterly unconscious.

It had taken a bit of time, but she’d managed to untie her wrists and pull the key out of his pocket. He’d been snoring when she left him. Making certain to lock the door, she’d slipped the key in her bodice and walked away.

“Where is he?” A black storm cloud would have looked like a fluffy white cloud compared to the dark violence in Felix’s gaze. “Where is the bastard?” He started past her down the alley, but she grabbed his wrist and pulled him back.

“Leave him. He cannot go anywhere. I want to see my children.” Tears thickened her voice. “I – I want to see my babies.”

Although he could have easily shaken free of her grip, Felix turned and pulled her against his chest. “And they want to see ye,” he said, burrowing his face in the snarled tendrils of her wild mane. “Your mother as well. She’s waiting for ye at Bow Street.”

They met Owen in front of a cobbler’s shop two blocks away. He’d been searching another factory. It had been pure luck that Felix happened to choose the one where Felicity was being kept. Or, as she

preferred to think of it, fate.

“There you are.” Relief swept across his countenance as he and Felicity exchanged a short, friendly embrace. “Scarlett would have had my head if something happened to you.”

“Would she?” Felicity said doubtfully as she stepped back. Since their little tiff over a month ago the two women had hardly seen one another. They’d both been busy, of course. She with Felix and Scarlett with her renovations. But there was also tension there. Tension Felicity had never fully understood...until she looked up and caught a quick exchange of glances between Owen and Felix. “You did something. The two of you. What?” she demanded.

“It’s my fault, love. I’ve been meanin’ to tell ye...” Sheepish, Felix ducked his head and muttered, “I may have asked the Cap’n not to let ye live with them if the occasion arose.”

“Why on earth would you do such a thing?”

“So ye would have to live with me instead,” Felix said, as if the answer should have been obvious. “But then ye seemed happy at your mother’s...” He shrugged helplessly.

“We will discuss this at a later date,” she said. Bothersome man. She should have been angry with him, and perhaps she would have been if she were not so exhausted...and his boyish grin was not so very charming. At least it was a relief to know that Scarlett had only been acting with her best interests at heart. Or rather Felix’s best interests, which to Scarlett would have been one and the same given how determined she’d been to see Felicity and Felix together. “Right now the only thing I want to do is see Henry and Anne and get out of these

filthy clothes.”

“Where is Ashburn?” Owen asked. “It *was* Ashburn, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Felicity said wearily, pressing a hand to her brow. “It was. He is in a locked room at the end of the alley. I have the key, here.” Pulling it out of her bodice, she handed it to Owen. “Do with him what you will but...please be kind. He’s a very troubled man.” Beside her she felt Felix tense, but for once he managed to hold his tongue, and for that she was grateful. After everything she had endured, the last thing she wanted was more violence.

“I will send someone for my personal carriage.” Owen stepped inside the cobbler shop, leaving Felicity and Felix alone.

Wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her against his side, Felix pressed his mouth to the top of her head before he began touching her back in long, soothing strokes. “If ye don’t wish to talk about it yet I understand,” he said quietly. “But I have to know. How did ye manage it?”

She’d been wondering when he was going to ask.

“Do you mean how I managed to escape?” she said, tilting her head back.

Intrigued, he nodded. “Aye. Exactly.”

When she told him what had happened he threw back his head and laughed, then squeezed her tight. “Ah, love. Ye never cease to amaze me.”

“Do you know what I was thinking, when I was trapped in that room, staring down the barrel of a pistol?”

Instantly sobering, Felix shook his head and the hand he’d wrapped

around her back fell away. “Ye must have been terrified. And it’s all my fault. If I’d known Ashburn had paid off the hackney driver–”

“There was no way you could have known that. Please do not blame yourself. I don’t.” She turned to face him. Stared straight into his bright golden eyes. And felt nothing but love. “When I was in that room, when I feared I was going to die, I thought of you and the children. And I thought of the woman I was before I met you. A woman who blindly obeyed her husband. A woman who was so desperate to be perfect and polite and well-mannered that she forsook her own happiness. And I knew that no matter what happened, I was never going to become that woman again. Because of you.”

“It wasn’t only because of me–” he began, but she silenced him with a quick shake of her head.

“I am not finished. When Ezra divorced me, I never thought I would fall in love again. I convinced myself that it was better to be alone than to risk having everything taken away from me. But do you know what I have come to realize?”

“What is that?” Felix said huskily as he reached out to brush a tendril of hair from her cheek.

“Dresses, cloaks, carriages – even a person’s social standing. They are all material things and they do not matter. Not really. But love... love matters.” She smiled up at him. “The love of a mother for her children. The love of a man for children he’s accepted as his own. And the love of a woman for a good, kind-hearted man. When Ezra divorced me, I did not lose anything. In fact, I was given something. Something irreplaceable. Something I would not trade for the world.”

Felix drew her into a protective embrace, one arm curving around the small of her back while the other cupped her cheek, thumb brushing against the tears of joy shimmering in her eyes. “And what would that be?” he said softly.

“*You*, Mr. Spencer. I was given you.”

“Felix, love.” A rakish grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. “I think it’s time ye called me Felix.”

“Yes.” Laughing, crying, she flung arms around his neck and kissed him through her tears. “Yes, I believe it is.”

EPILOGUE

THEY WERE MARRIED EXACTLY one month later in the very same church where Scarlett and Owen had exchanged their vows. With all of Bow Street looking on, as well as Scarlett, Henry, little Anne, Mrs. Atwood, and even Mr. Darcy (sporting a very fashionable top hat), Felicity and Felix promised to love and cherish one another until the end of their days.

Only one person was absent.

Lord Grant Hargrave.

Instead of sitting in a narrow wooden pew, Grant was racing through the twisted alleys of St. Giles, London's most nefarious rookery. For such a large man he moved with surprising agility and quickness, bounding over crates and ducking beneath lines of dirty laundry in search of his prey.

Like a hound who had smelled the blood of a fox, he was unrelenting in his pursuit. Three times he'd come this close to the little thief that had been stealing jewelry from the *ton's* elite, and three times she'd managed to slip through his grasp.

She would not do it a fourth.

He tracked her into an abandoned tenement building. The stairs creaked ominously beneath his weight as he sprinted up them to the highest floor. A board splintered beneath his boot when he ran down the hall, falling away into nothingness. Having been scorched by fire,

the building wasn't sound. There was no telling how long it would hold, but if he went down with it then so would his thief, for he wasn't letting her go.

Not this time.

Faced with a door to his left and a door to his right, Grant was forced to make a decision. One door pointed at the street and the other at the alley. If he picked incorrectly, the thief would be gone and there'd be no telling when she would surface again. His gut told him to go left.

He went right.

The thief was perched on the windowsill when he slammed open the door. She glanced back at him over her shoulder, and her mouth curled in a sneer.

"You're too late, Runner."

She pushed herself quickly off the sill, but Grant was quicker. Throwing himself forward he managed to catch the hood of her cloak. He yanked. Hard. She fell backwards into him, and the force of their two bodies colliding sent them both sprawling onto the floor in a cloud of dust. Coughing, she tried to flip herself upright and make a run for the door, but he swept out his leg and struck her behind the knees.

He threw himself over her, thighs straddling her waist as he pinned her wrists together above her head in an iron grip. Hair the color of sunset flew in every direction as she tried to twist and buck, but try as she might she couldn't throw him off.

Chest heaving with the force of her exertion, she glared up at him

out of flashing green eyes and snapped her teeth, a fierce little wolf with her paw in a trap. Grant just grinned.

“Caught you.”

A DANGEROUS

AffAIR

- *Bow Street Brides, Book 3* -

JILLIAN EATON

A THIEF WITH NOTHING TO LOSE...

Juliet is beautiful, intelligent...and one of the best thieves in all of London. Raised in the cutthroat streets of St Giles, she's learned to survive by whatever means necessary. Even if those means include pretending to be a highborn lady to avoid capture by The Wolf, one of Bow Street's most cunning runners...and the only man to ever set her blood on fire.

A RUNNER WITH A SCORE TO SETTLE...

Grant is charismatic, titled...and second-in-command of the Bow Street Runners. When his captain orders him to find and arrest the lad who has been stealing jewelry from the ton's elite, he thinks it's just another job. Until the *lad* turns out to be a five foot, four inch red-haired hellion with a penchant for knives...and the softest lips he's ever kissed.

A DANGEROUS AFFAIR...

Juliet and Grant's daring game of cat and mouse will take them from the glittering ballrooms of Grosvenor Square to the dangerous alleys of the East End as they try to outwit one another...and fight their growing passion. But when an enemy from Juliet's past threatens her future, she has no other option except to trust the runner she has sworn to hate. Forced to choose between duty and desire, will Grant listen to his head...or risk everything to follow his heart?

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EPILOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

ST GILES ROOKERY was no place for a woman after dark. Or during the day for that matter, but Juliet had never let that stop her before and she had no intention of letting it stop her tonight.

She flitted through the darkness with the fluidity of a shadow, the worn leather soles of her boots scarcely touching the ground. The black cloak she had draped over her shoulders fluttered as she turned right and then left, navigating the twisted alleys with the ease and confidence of someone who had been born into them.

Jumping over a pool of foul smelling stagnant water and piss, she stopped in front of a narrow wooden door tucked away inside of an alcove. Raising her fist, she rapped her knuckles against the door three times. Waited for the length of a heartbeat. Knocked again. Creaking on its rusted hinges, the door swung open.

“Do ye have it?” The man who spoke was old and smelled of gin. Yet despite the map of wrinkles across his weathered face – or perhaps because of them – his watery blue gaze was cunningly sharp. “Do ye have the necklace?”

“Here.” She reached between her breasts and pulled out a small velvet reticule. But when the man made a quick grab for it she shook her head and took a step back, eyes narrowing to annoyed slits of green. “How long have we been doing business, Yeti? You know I

require payment first.”

The old man growled under his breath, but after a moment’s pause he slapped a leather pouch into her extended palm. “There,” he said. “Now give me the bloody necklace.”

Juliet’s fingers tightened around the pouch as she tested its weight. One delicately arched brow lifted. “The rest, Yeti.”

He made a scoffing sound. “I don’t know what ye are—”

“The rest,” she said evenly.

“Ye drive a hard bargain, Jules.”

“A fair bargain,” she corrected as he dug into the pocket of his sagging trousers. “And more than you deserve for the shite you tried to pull last time. Did you think I wouldn’t realize those shillings were nothing more than painted copper? I should charge you twice as much for the trouble. It’s a good thing we’re friends, Yeti.”

“Friends,” he grumbled under his breath as he gave her a handful of coins. “If I’m your friend I’d hate to see how ye treat your enemies.”

“Yes. You would.” After quickly counting the coins to ensure she’d been paid in full, Juliet slid them into the leather pouch and tucked the pouch into her boot before she gave Yeti what he’d paid twenty gold pounds for.

Not a bad take for a night’s work, she thought silently. It would see her comfortably through to her next job, a townhouse on the edge of Grosvenor Square where another one of her buyers had his eye on a diamond bracelet.

Sliding the necklace out of its velvet pouch, Yeti held it up towards the lantern hanging above his door and whistled under his breath

when the stones gleamed a deep, vibrant red. “She’s a beaut, ain’t she?”

Juliet’s narrow shoulders lifted and fell in a careless shrug. “I suppose. I’ve never particularly cared for rubies.”

“A jewel thief who doesn’t like jewels,” Yeti muttered under his breath. “What’s the bloody world coming to?” Quick as a wink the necklace disappeared into the folds of his coat. In his day he’d been the best pickpocket this side of the Thames. Time and too much gin had dulled his reflexes, but his fingers were still nimble.

“Don’t fancy what you take, Yeti. You taught me that.” Juliet’s neck abruptly swiveled when she heard the distinctive *click* of a stone being turned over. Frowning, she stared intently into the inky darkness, her hand inching down towards the knife she always carried on her waist. There was a pistol on her opposite hip. A dagger strapped to the inside of her thigh. And, just for good measure, a tiny pair of sewing shears tied to her wrist.

She’d never killed a man, but she’d spilled blood. Plenty of it. And for the past two nights she had been plagued by the uneasy feeling of being watched. But just as her hand began to curl around the smooth handle of her knife a yellow tabby darted across the alley and disappeared into a pile of wooden crates. Exhaling slowly, she turned her attention back to Yeti who lifted a scruffy white brow.

“Trouble?” he asked, scratching underneath his chin.

“Nothing I cannot handle.”

“Ye could always quit, ye know. Hang it up and walk away for good. I know ye have enough blunt.”

“No one ever has enough blunt.” Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to his rough cheek. The grizzled old man was as close as she’d ever come to having a grandfather. Or a father, for that matter. “You taught me that as well. Sleep tight, Yeti.”

“Aye.” He patted his coat pocket. “With this pretty under my pillow I’ll do just that. Watch yerself, Jules.” A line of irritation creased his weathered brow. “The runners are getting closer. Hans said he saw one of the bastards all the way down on Finley Street. It’s that damn Spencer. Never thought he’d be the one to go turncoat on us.”

“Would you rather he have ended up in Newgate? Or worse?” Not too long ago Felix Spencer had been the greatest thief in all of London. There wasn’t a painting he couldn’t pinch. A necklace he couldn’t swipe. He’d been the best...until he’d been caught. But instead of stretching him up by his neck or throwing him in prison, the new captain of the runners had given him a choice: spend the rest of his life rotting away in a cell or put his considerable talents to good use on Bow Street.

Felix had been a runner for nearly two years now, but it still gave her a jolt every time she saw him walking down the street in broad daylight. She could only imagine what it was like for Yeti. She knew the old man felt betrayed, especially since he’d been the one to teach Felix everything he knew, but what had he expected? She knew if she’d been in Felix’s shoes she would have made the same decision. Anything to avoid the hell on earth that was Newgate Prison.

“He’s not giving them names.” She squeezed Yeti’s hand. “If he were, we’d both be locked up already.”

“Aye,” Yeti grumbled after a pause. “I suppose ye are right about that. Still...”

“I know. It does not sit well with me either. One of our own, working for *them*.” The corners of her mouth tightened. “I’d be happy if I never saw another runner for as long as I lived. Cock sucking bastards.” Turning her head, she spat on the ground in disgust and Yeti chuckled.

“Easy, lass. Don’t go losing that Irish temper of yours over something ye can’t control.”

“For the hundredth time, I’m not bloody Irish.” And it annoyed her to no end every time he said otherwise. The truth of the matter was that she had no idea where – or who – she’d come from. Her parents very well *could* have been from Ireland. She had no way of knowing. They’d both perished in a fire when she was no more than a babe. To this day, she did not even know their names.

“Ye’ve the hair of one, don’t ye? Redder than the rubies ye just pinched. Never seen the likes of it in my whole life. Fine ladies would pay a pretty penny to have that color. As would fine men,” Yeti said meaningfully.

She took a step back and folded her arms. “I’m a thief, not a whore.”

“And I never said ye were, did I? But ye could be a rich man’s mistress. Ye have the look of one. Clean the soot off of ye face and trade those pants ye insist on wearin’ for a fancy dress and ye would blend right in with all the pretty ladies in Hyde Park. Ye could live in a big house in Grosvenor Square. Have yer own servants. Go to tea

parties and balls and the like. Ye could get out, lass. Start a new life for yerself.”

“A mistress is just a fancy word for whore and I would rather die than belong to any man.” It was not an exaggeration. The life Yeti described held little appeal to Juliet. She may not have had dresses or servants, but she was free. Free to make her own decisions. Free to do what she wanted when she wanted it. Free to live her own life as she saw fit. Could those women in their fancy dresses and big houses say the same? She answered to no one, and there was no man on God’s green earth worth giving all of that up for.

“Ye say that now. Just wait until ye meet the right one. All right, all right.” Yeti waved his hand in surrender when her green eyes flashed. “Don’t get riled up on my account. Be safe out there, lass. Are ye done for the night?”

“I’ve one stop yet.”

“Well best be moving on then.”

Drawing the hood of her cloak up and over her head, Juliet stepped down off the doorstep and into the shadows. Skirting the pile of crates where the cat had disappeared, she walked quickly to the end of the alley. But instead of turning left as she should have done, she turned right instead and immediately flattened herself against the crumbling brick wall of an abandoned factory.

Someone was following her. She could feel it in her bones. In the whisper of awareness at the nape of her neck. In the accelerated pounding of her heart.

And it wasn’t a bloody cat.

Silver moonlight reflected off her dagger as she silently unstrapped it from her thigh. A gift from Yeti, it was surprisingly light for its size with a handle made from whalebone and a thin blade that was sharp enough to carve a man's throat from ear to ear without spilling a single drop of blood.

She heard the muffled beat of approaching footsteps. A quiet exhale of breath. The rustle of fabric.

And the distinctive *click* of a pistol being cocked.

"You can come out from behind there." The voice was deeply masculine, the vernacular clear and crisp and threaded with a hint of aristocracy. "With your arms raised, if you please."

Gritting her teeth in silent frustration, Juliet lifted both arms and carefully stepped out from behind the wall. Several paces away stood a man holding a pistol. A pistol he had pointed straight at her chest. It was too dark to make out his features clearly, but his silhouette was all sharp angles and lean muscle.

She could tell he was tall. Taller than she by at least a head, if not more. His hair was as black as the shadows that crept along the walls. And his clothes were impeccably cut to fit his lanky frame, indicating that despite his current surroundings he was a man of wealth and substance.

"Come closer," he said, gesturing her forward with a jab of his weapon.

Left with little choice in the matter, she edged forward a few inches, purposefully keeping her head tilted down. With her hair pulled back and her feminine curves hidden beneath the folds of her

cloak, she passed easily for a boy. A young one given how smooth her porcelain skin was, but a boy nevertheless.

While being a female came with its own distinct advantages, there were none to be found at night in the middle of the East End. She still distinctly remembered the day Yeti had pulled her aside and asked what she wanted to do with her life. Confused, she'd blinked up at him, all wide green eyes and freckles and teeth that were still a bit too big for her mouth.

"What do ye mean?" It wasn't until later that she had taken the time to rid herself of her cockney accent, and she'd spoken with the vernacular of a common guttersnipe.

"What do I mean..." he had muttered, pulling off his cap and skimming his hand through his hair. It hadn't been gray then, but rather a thick, nondescript brown that he'd kept shorn close to his skull. "I mean ye're getting older. Taller. Ye're...filling out." His gaze had dipped down to her chest and his cheeks had reddened before he'd abruptly looked away. "Ye are turning into a woman, lass. And a pretty one at that."

"I am not!" she had cried indignantly.

"Aye." He'd crushed his hat between his hands. "Ye are. The truth is ye would have done a sight better to have been born a boy, but I guess we don't have much choice in those matters, do we? Ye are what ye are. And ye have a decision to make."

"What sort of decision?" she'd asked suspiciously before her eyes widened in distress. "Ye aren't going to send me away like you did Sam, are ye? Please don't. Please. I'll do better. I promise. I – I'll start

pinching twice as many purses. And I'm ready to start on the safes. I know I am. Please don't--"

"Sam wasn't sent away, lass. She left of 'er own accord after I sat her down jest like I'm doing with ye."

"I don't understand."

"No," Yeti had sighed. "I can see that ye don't." The floorboards had creaked beneath his heavy boots as he'd walked from one side of the small, windowless flat to the other, careful not to step on the lumpy gray cot Juliet shared with Eddy and Bran, two pickpockets of a similar age. Not that any of them knew what their exact age was. They were all orphans, brought under Yeti's wing when they were still small enough to squeeze through carriage windows and take what was inside.

Sometimes, when she was very tired, Juliet closed her eyes and dreamed of a woman with soft blonde hair and a kind smile. She liked to think it was her mother, but there was no way to know for certain. Yeti and his collection of orphans was the only family she'd ever known.

"Do ye know why I always have ye wear a hat and trousers, lass?"

Juliet had nodded slowly. "So my hair doesn't get in my eyes and I can run away." Her little chest had swelled with no small amount of pride. "I'm the quickest, ye know. No one can beat me. Not even Felix."

"Aye, that ye are. But the hat and trousers serve another purpose. They make ye look like a boy," Yeti had explained when Juliet's head tilted in confusion. "Because no one bothers with boys. They're a dime

a dozen around here, and no one thinks twice about them. But girls... especially girls who look like ye do...well, that's a different story. Do ye know what a lady of the night is, lass?"

"Yes," Juliet had said solemnly. "Bran told me. They let men touch their tits for money."

Yeti had snorted. "That's the gist of it, I suppose." He'd looked closely at her. "Is that something ye want to do? Let men touch yer lady parts for money? Ye would have a fine room all to yerself with a real bed. All the food ye could ever hope to eat. Silk dresses and pretty fans and fancy shoes."

"That sounds nice, I suppose." She didn't care much about dresses and fans and shoes, but she *did* like to eat.

"Ye will have to sleep with men."

"I sleep next to Bran and Eddy every night."

"Aye, but that's different. These men...they won't always be kind to ye, lass. And they'll be strangers. Strangers who use ye for yer body. It won't be pleasant work. Ye won't have a say in who comes to yer room or what ye have to do once they're in there. Do ye understand what I'm tellin' ye?"

She thought so. Or at least as much as a young girl could understand such things. "That's what Sam is now? A—" she had paused as she searched for the right word "—lady of the night?"

"Aye."

She'd chewed on her bottom lip while she had mulled it over. "But what if I want to stay here, with ye and Bran and Eddy? What if I want to be a thief?"

“If that is what ye want, that is what ye can do.” Yeti hadn’t said in so many words that he was pleased with her decision, but she’d known by the approving light in his gaze that she had made the right one. “I’ll make ye the best thief the East End has ever seen, lass. Mark me words.”

That was the last night she’d slept beside Bran and Eddy. From that day forward she had her own cot, and whenever she left the flat Yeti made sure her hair was tied back and her breasts, small as they’d been at the time, were bound flat to her chest. He called her Jules, and instructed everyone else who knew that she was really a girl to do the same.

She had been pretending to be a boy for so long that sometimes even *she* forgot she was a female. But now, standing before the stranger with his dark wavy hair and lean, muscular build, there was no doubt in her mind as to her sex.

Even without having a clear glimpse of his countenance she knew he was handsome. One of the handsomest men she’d ever seen. Just as she knew that he was trouble, and the sooner she put as much distance between them as possible the better. Unfortunately, the stranger had over ideas.

“Closer,” he commanded, beckoning her forward as if she were a dog and he her master. But Juliet answered to no one, not even if they were holding a pistol, and instead of obeying his order she bared her teeth.

“Bloody hell,” she snapped. “Do you want me to climb up on your lap, then? Because if you’re looking for that type of service there are a

few gents around the corner who would be happy to oblige. But I'm not one of them."

His husky laugh did the oddest thing to her belly. The muscles in her abdomen clenched tight and then slowly released, her insides quivering as though she'd swallowed a mouthful of butterflies. Annoyed by the distracting sensation, she shifted her weight to her toes and fixed the stranger with a fierce glare.

"What's so amusing?" she demanded.

"Your pitiful attempt at diversion. If I was after a good tugging I'd head to the nearest whorehouse. I want the necklace you stole, lad."

"I don't have any idea what you are talking about."

"Don't you?" The side of his mouth curved ever-so-slightly, as if he found her deceit amusing.

"No," she said flatly.

"Then let me refresh your memory. Lord and Lady Munthorpe reported someone broke into their townhouse four nights past and stole Lady Munthorpe's ruby necklace."

Not by a single flicker of an eyelash did Juliet betray her guilt. Being a good thief involved more than squeezing into small spaces and taking things that did not belong to you. It meant being a good liar, and she was one of the best. Lifting one shoulder in a careless shrug she said, "Maybe this Lady Munthorpe merely misplaced the necklace. Did you consider that?"

"It would be easy enough to do, I suppose," he said thoughtfully. "Given how much jewelry she has."

"Precisely my point."

“But that doesn’t explain the brooch taken from Elm Street or the sapphires that disappeared from a safe in Highland Manor, does it?”

Juliet hid her surprise behind a quick blink. How could he possibly know all that? Unless...

“*Runner.*” She hissed the word as though it was a curse, which for her and her ilk it might as well have been.

Comprised of nearly a dozen men, the Bow Street Runner’s patrolled all of London and its surrounding roads and villages. Emboldened by the Crown, they were worse than thief takers and bounty hunters combined because they could not be bribed.

A thief taker you could reason with. A bounty hunter you could slip a bit of blunt to and be on your way. But a runner...a runner wasn’t satisfied until the magistrate pounded his gavel. And this one in particular seemed more determined than most, for only a very brave runner – or an incredibly stupid one – would dare venture this deeply into the rotting bowels of St Giles.

Her eyes narrowed. How was it he had managed to do what all the others hadn’t? She’d had a few close calls over the years, but she’d never been caught. Not by one of *them*. How long had he been following her?

Long enough to know what her last three takes had been. Bloody hell, she hadn’t even told Yeti about the sapphires. Did he know about her other jobs? Or where she lived? Her chest tightened at the thought even as a surge of anger left a bitterly metallic taste in her mouth.

Damn the runners. She wasn’t hurting anyone. Yes, she was stealing, but only from those who could easily afford to lose what she took.

What was one lonely ruby necklace to a woman whose husband had three carriages? Or a brooch to an estate that was nearly half the size of the East End? She could have wiped their coffers clean and there would have been no one to stop her, but she had restrained herself, hadn't she? One piece from one house; that was her golden rule. The runner shouldn't have been trying to arrest her. He should have been *thanking* her. And then going on his way to catch the *real* criminals. The murderers and the rapists and the brothel owners who employed girls as young as twelve and thirteen.

"You have no proof I stole shite," she spat.

He made a *tsking* sound. "Ah, but I do. You yourself just admitted to stealing the necklace, and as you did not deny taking the brooch I can only assume you stole that as well. You've been rather busy, haven't you lad?"

"Bollocks!" she cried. "I didn't admit to anything because there's nothing to admit to. I'm innocent."

"Is that so?"

"Aye." She gave a defiant toss of her head and met his stare for the first time. *Emeralds*, she realized, momentarily thrown off guard when she found herself glaring into the greenest eyes she'd ever seen. *His eyes are the color of emeralds*. "You – you have the wrong person."

Bloody hell Jules, she thought in self-disgust when she stumbled over her own tongue. *Pull yourself together. Green eyes or not, this bounder is about to haul your arse down to Newgate if you don't think of something quick*.

"How old are you, lad? I suppose it doesn't matter," he went on

before she could reply. “You’re young yet. If you come in quietly I’ll put in a good word for you with the Magistrate. He’s a fair man. You’ll only serve four, five years at the most. When you get out you’ll still have your entire life ahead of. You can turn things around. Take an apprenticeship or better yourself through education. It’s not too late.”

Why did everyone think she wanted something different than the life she had? First Yeti, now this green-eyed runner who would have done well to keep his thoughts to himself. She *liked* her life. She liked what she did. She liked waking up every morning never knowing what the day would bring. Given the choice, there was nothing she would change. Given the choice, she would be a thief until she died. Which, given her current circumstances, could be any minute now.

“I’m telling you, you have the wrong person.”

“I don’t think so.” Keeping the pistol pointed at her with one hand, the runner used the other to unclip a pair of iron manacles from his belt. “Step lively now, I’ve other places to be that do not include an alley in the middle of St Giles.” His nose wrinkled. “Especially one that smells like piss. Honestly. How do you stand it?”

Eyeing the manacles as a wolf would a steel trap, Juliet started to edge backwards. “You can take those shackles and shove ‘em up your arse, you bleedin’ ratbag bastard. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Come now, lad. Is that any way to talk to your betters?” He sighed when her hand darted down towards her waist and the pistol that was strapped to it. “Be reasonable. There’s no need for violence.”

“Bugger off,” she said between clenched teeth. “I said I’m not going anywhere with you, and I meant it. You’ll have to shoot me dead

first.”

His countenance softened. “No one is going to be shooting anyone. I’m not in the habit of harming children.”

Well in that case...

Spinning around, she bolted out of the alley as if the hounds of hell were snapping at her heels.

CHAPTER TWO

GRANT CONSIDERED HIMSELF to be in excellent physical condition. He never drank or ate in excess. He upheld a rigorous training schedule that included horseback riding, boxing, and lovemaking. One might not think lovemaking was exercise, but that just meant they weren't doing it properly. He could lift a full-bodied woman clear off the ground and hold her pinned up against a wall with one arm if the occasion called for it.

And the occasion often called for it.

But despite his strength and considerable endurance, he found himself struggling to keep up with a boy who had yet to see his first whisker. It was bloody embarrassing. And humiliating. And he was damned glad Spencer wasn't around to witness it.

Peeling off his waistcoat, he let it fall to the ground before he followed the boy up a rickety set of stairs that led to the third floor of a crumbling tenement building. Leaping over a drunkard sprawled across the top step, he hit the hallway in a full sprint, but when he reached the end of it his quarry was nowhere to be seen.

Lungs burning, nostrils flaring, Grant stopped short and braced his hands on his knees.

"Bloody *hell*." Had he known the lad was going to give him this much trouble he'd have brought one of the Ferguson brothers along.

Although maybe it was better he was doing this alone. If word got out that a child had run circles around him he would never hear the end of it. Not from Spencer. Not from the captain. Not from any of them. He'd be willing to bet even Hawke would have a good chuckle and the thought of that behemoth laughing at his expense was all the motivation he needed to force himself upright.

No one bested Grant Hargrave. Least of all an arrogant pup who needed to be taught his place. The lad could count himself lucky he *was* so young, for if a full grown man had spoken to Grant with the same careless disregard he would have found himself sprawled on his arse spitting out blood and teeth before he knew what had happened.

During his eight years as a runner, Grant had taken down some of London's deadliest and most ruthless criminals. He had plenty of scars to show for his troubles, but he'd never backed down. Never flinched. Never cowered. And he'd *never* given up. Once he caught scent of his prey he did not stop until he'd run it to ground.

The boy would be no exception.

"Come now lad," he called out in a friendly tone that was at direct odds with his clenched jaw and narrowed gaze. If not for this business he'd be at The Pony right now, a frothy pint of ale in his hand and a squirming wench on his lap. "Best turn yourself in. You've nowhere left to go."

There were only five doors between the end of the hallway and the stairs. Which meant there were only five places the lad could be hiding. When he was met with silence, Grant transferred the pistol to his right hand and opened the first door with his left.

Unlocked, it swung inward, revealing a room devoid of any furniture save a broken chair. Moonlight streamed in through a cracked window, its silvery light allowing him to do a cursory search of the walls for any closets or hidden openings. Satisfied the room was empty he moved on to the next. It was empty too, as was the third and the fourth. Left with the fifth and final door, his mouth curved smugly when he tried the knob and it was locked.

“All right lad. Good on you for leading me on such a merry chase. But the chase is over. Time to come out and give yourself up.” He punctuated his command by striking the door with his fist. And while the force of the blow rattled the door on its hinges, the boy refused to emerge.

“Damned stubborn little bugger,” Grant muttered under his breath even as part of him couldn’t help but admire the boy’s courage. He was a fighter, that was for certain. Not much of a surprise given that he had managed to survive in St Giles for so long.

If the East End of London was a cave of dark, treacherous deeds then St Giles was its den. There was no place for the weak here. No shelter for the timid. The law of the land was kill or be killed. And stronger, tougher, older men than the boy had met untimely, gruesome ends at the end of a knife or the smoking barrel of a pistol.

He lifted his own pistol and drew back the hammer as he angled his shoulder at the door.

“I’m coming in so you better stand back,” he warned. “Unless you want a mouthful of wood.”

Grant usually wasn’t so accommodating of criminals, but there was

something about the boy that made him feel almost...protective. Perhaps it was because he knew the lad's life couldn't have been an easy one. Or maybe it was his age. He didn't look much older than Grant's nephew, a bright-eyed, mischievous boy who had just celebrated his tenth birthday. Either way, he didn't want to hurt the lad. At least not any more than was absolutely necessary.

One hard blow and the door broke open. Weapon drawn, he charged into the room.

And found it completely empty.

"What the devil," he breathed, scratching the side of his neck. He'd been certain he had finally run his prey to ground. In fact, he would have been willing to bet ten pounds on it. But unless the boy had jumped out the window – doubtful, given they were three stories up – he had, for all intents and purposes, vanished into thin air.

Bemused, Grant turned in a circle...and caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his right eye as his quarry made a mad dash for the doorway. The pesky little brat had flattened himself against the wall closest to the door and had just been waiting for Grant to step further into the room so he could make his escape.

"You there!" Grant bellowed, making a wild lunge forward. "Stop!"

The lad ignored him. Leaping over the drunk who was still passed out at the top of the stairs, he jumped up onto the wobbly wooden banister. It groaned beneath his weight and Grant uttered a savage curse.

"Get down," he ordered, furious that the boy was heedlessly risking his life. He knew that he didn't want to go to prison. No sane man did.

But surely a few years spent behind bars was better than a broken neck. “You’re going to kill yourself.”

“And do your job for you?” The lad peeked back at him over his shoulder. As he did the hood of his cloak slipped back. “I don’t think so.” Straddling the banister, he pushed off and slid down it in one fell swoop. Before he’d even reached the bottom and taken off at a run Grant knew he was gone. At least for tonight. But that wasn’t what had him scowling.

Maybe it had been a trick of the moonlight...but when the boy had glanced up at him he could have sworn the *lad* was really a *lass*. Which was so impossible it did not even bear thinking about.

A female thief? Ridiculous.

Boys could have long, thick lashes as well. And tip-tilted eyes that made them look like a cat. And lush red lips that instantly made a man think dark, wicked thoughts. It may have been uncommon, but it was far more probable than the alternative. Although it bloody well didn’t explain the sudden surge of heat in his loins.

Sliding his pistol back into its holster, Grant scrubbed both hands down across his face. He was clearly exhausted and seeing things that simply weren’t there. Something that was bound to happen after going two nights without a wink of sleep.

While some may have thought the life of a Bow Street Runner was exciting and thrilling, the truth of the matter was that it was more often tedious than it was dangerous. Not that he hadn’t encountered his fair share of danger, but he’d also spent countless hours wading through paperwork and preparing cases for trial and crouching behind

crates of rotten fish waiting for a piece of incriminating evidence to exchange hands. That was where he'd spent last night, and how he had known where to look for the jewel thief he'd been chasing for the better part of three months.

Lord knew the lad was always careful never to leave any evidence behind. Grant had searched the houses that had been robbed high and low, but he'd never been able to find so much as a muddy footprint or a sliver of hair. So instead of trying to track the thief he'd tracked the jewelry, which had ultimately led him to a dark little corner of the East End where – by a sheer stroke of luck – he'd quickly found the lad.

And lost him just as fast.

"I need a damn drink," he muttered into his calloused palms.

"Did someone say drink?" Woken from his stupor by all the commotion, the drunk struggled to his feet. Swaying slightly side to side, he grinned toothlessly at Grant and held out a half empty bottle. "I've some gin if ye want. Five pence."

"Here." Slapping a handful of coins into the drunk's hand that amounted to far more than five pence, Grant took the bottle of gin and tipped it back to his mouth. It tasted like the devil's own piss, but at least it kept the night from being a complete loss.

Tucking the bottle under his arm, he walked slowly down the stairs and out into the night.

JULIET DID NOT SLEEP. Staring up at the cracks in the plaster ceiling above her bed, she remained awake until dawn broke out

across the sky in a somber spill of muted pink and the nest of starlings in the eaves began their incessant chirping.

The birds had moved in two weeks ago. The feathery little buggers did not pay rent and she would have been well within her rights to get a broom handle and knock down their nest, but she didn't have the heart. They'd move on soon enough and when they did she'd make sure to nail up a board so they couldn't return.

Rolling off the lumpy mattress, she washed her face and hands with cold water from a porcelain basin. Like the rest of the furnishings in the small room, the basin was old but functional. Given her line of work, she could have easily afforded new things. Prettier things. Fancier things. But everything in the bedchamber held sentimental value to her, including the wash basin. As plain and nondescript as it appeared, it was one of her most prized possessions, having been the first thing she had ever stolen all on her own.

Before you can steal something small, Yeti had told his trio of eager pickpockets, *you need to learn how to steal something large*. Then he'd set them loose in Mayfair, a tidy district of middle class homes and businesses just outside of Grosvenor Square.

Bran had nabbed a flower vase.

Eddy had returned with a pair of riding boots.

And she'd brought back a wash basin.

Muffling a yawn with the back of her hand, Juliet pulled out a collared shirt and a pair of brown trousers from the wooden trunk at the foot of her bed. After a cursory glance at the door to ensure it was still closed and locked, she stripped out of her nightdress, shivering

slightly as the cool air stirred against her naked flesh. It may have been the first month of spring, but winter wasn't quite done with London yet.

Every morning the ground was covered in a layer of cool silver and chimney smoke continued to darken the sky. The tree branches were still skeletal and barren, although if she looked close enough she could just see tiny green buds beginning to emerge.

Spring was one of her favorite seasons, if only because it meant summer was soon to follow. Town was not a particularly pleasant place to be when the sun burned hot and the smell of unwashed bodies hung heavily in the air, but it meant empty houses and easy makes as the Ton flocked *en masse* to the country.

She already had a few pieces of jewelry in mind. One bracelet in particular. But she wouldn't be doing *any* stealing with a runner hot on her trail. Which meant she had to shake him loose and go about it quickly, as she didn't have the luxury of sitting idly by with her heels up.

A scowl darkened her countenance as she wondered how the runner had managed to track her down. Someone had to have tipped him off. She was willing to bet her life on it. He may have been good – there'd been a moment where she'd genuinely feared he was going to catch her – but he wasn't *that* good. No one was. And she was always very, very careful.

There was a reason she'd never spent so much as a night in Newgate. It wasn't enough just to know how to steal. A good thief also needed to know how not to get caught. Which was why she always

planned out every take down to the last, tiniest detail. She never made any impulsive decisions. Never let herself get greedy. And she never, *ever* told anyone what she planned to steal.

From an early age she'd discovered she worked best alone. Both in her work and out of it. It was simply easier that way. To rely on herself instead of someone else. To trust herself and no one else. It was the American inventor Benjamin Franklin who had said that three could keep a secret if two of them were dead, and it was a phrase she'd always abided by. Yet despite all of her precautions, the runner had known precisely where to find her. More than that, he'd known about her last two jobs. Which meant someone was spilling secrets.

And when she found them they were going to pay dearly for their mistake.

Before Juliet pulled the shirt over her head she bound her breasts with a long, sturdy strip of cloth. Truth be told there wasn't much to bind. She was a naturally slender woman, her body long and willowy slim. But there could be no questions as to her sexuality, and so wrapping her breasts had become as much a part of her daily routine as washing her face or brushing her hair.

She'd just pulled her shirt over her head when a fist rapped against the door. Quickly yanking on her trousers, she grabbed the knife she kept on her writing desk – one could never be too careful – and padded silently to the door, her bare feet barely touching the floorboards.

"Who is it?" she demanded, her eyes narrowing with suspicion. Her roommate knew better than to bother her before noon. Only a

stranger – or someone with a death wish – would come knocking before she'd had her first cup of coffee. For an instant she imagined it was the runner from last night...and the same queer, fluttering sensation filled her belly as she rose up on her toes and peered out the small hole she'd cut in the middle of the door.

“Bran.” Rolling her eyes, she fell back onto her heels with a heavy *thud* and unlocked the door. Opening it, she beckoned him into her room with a quick, irritated flick of her wrist. “What the bollocks are you doing lurking about? Shouldn't you still be in bed with one of your whores?”

Smirking, Bran strolled past her and dropped his rangy body onto a velvet settee. A tall, strikingly handsome man with the face of an angel and the heart of a devil, he was Juliet's brother in every way but blood. Aside from Yeti, there was no one she trusted more. Although she could have done without the constant parade of strumpets marching past her room at one in the bloody morning.

“Jealous much?” His eyes, the icy blue of a frozen lake in the middle of winter, flashed with amusement.

“Of your venereal diseases?” she snorted. “I think not.”

“I'm clean, love.”

“And I'm the Queen of England.” She crossed her arms. “What do you want, Bran? Besides a swift kick in the arse. Do you've any idea what bloody time it is?”

“You're awake, aren't you?”

Only because I never went to sleep, she thought silently. She knew she needed to tell Bran about what had happened and she would...

eventually. But first she needed to find out who the runner was, and who the devil had tipped him off.

She knew it wasn't Bran. He would never betray her. But he kept company with all sorts of unsavory characters; ones who would sell their own sister to a brothel if it meant a few extra coins in their pocket.

"Well?" she said instead. "What are you doing here? And be quick about it. I've better things to do with my time than spend it looking at your sorry mug."

"Hasn't anyone ever told you that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar?"

"I kill flies. I don't catch them."

His husky laugh filled the room. "And Yeti wonders why more men aren't knocking at your door. You're a tough one, Jules." His expression sobered. "I'm here because of the runners."

Her shoulders stiffened. "What about them?"

"They've been a pain in the arse ever since that Steel bloke took over. Do ye know they caught Remy last night? He's sitting in a cell in Newgate as we speak. And last week they pinched Holloway right out of his bed."

She'd heard about Holloway. "What should we do about it?"

"What the bollocks *can* we do?" Shoving his thick mane of disheveled blond hair out of his eyes, Bran strode to the nearest window and stared out through the dingy glass to the alley below.

Their townhouse was at the end of a long, narrow row of tenements. When they'd acquired it – in a card game, no less – it had

been chopped up into tiny flats, each one hardly bigger than a closet. After extensive renovations, the majority of which they'd managed to do themselves, it was now one of the finest homes in all of St Giles. Not that anyone would know from looking at its shabby exterior of crumbling brick and cracked plaster.

They'd left the outside untouched on purpose, not wanting to draw any unwanted attention to their little safe haven. As far as anyone walking by on the street was concerned it was just another rundown tenement infested with beggars and rats.

"The smart thing to do would be to lay low for a while," he said without looking at her. "Let them spend all their time and energy gathering up the small bait. They'll get tired of coming to the East End eventually, and when they do we can resume our...activities."

"Lay *low*?" If she hadn't known for certain that Bran was deadly serious, she would have laughed. Instead she settled for another snort. "It was only a matter of time before those two green heads got themselves caught. They don't have a full working brain between them, and I for one am not going to roll belly up just because of a couple of runners."

"I knew ye would say that," Bran muttered.

"Then why bring it up in the first place?"

"Because," he said, glowering at her over his shoulder, "I thought for once ye might listen to bloody reason. But I guess that was expecting too much."

"I'm a thief," she said flatly. "It's who I am. It's what I do. Don't ask me to change that."

“No one’s asking ye to change who ye are. Jesus, Mary and Joseph.” A bit of Irish slid into his voice as he shook his head in exasperation. Unlike Juliet, Bran knew who his parents were. Or at least who they had been.

The bastard son of an English lady and an Irish blacksmith, he’d lived in Ireland until the age of seven when his grandfather, an earl, had tracked down his daughter and dragged her back home. She’d insisted on taking Bran with her, but after she died of consumption Bran’s loving grandfather had tossed him aside like a bucket of unwanted scraps.

“Jest keep your head down for a little bit,” Bran continued. “We have enough blunt to tide us over without ye needing to crack any new houses. Have a nice rest, Jules. Go on a holiday. Ye deserve it.”

“We both know what you would do with *your* holiday,” she said, her gaze dipping derisively to his nether regions before snapping back up to his face. “What the devil would you have *me* do?”

“Bollocks if I know.” His rugged shoulders lifted in a shrug. “Whatever it is women do. And ye *are* a woman, whether ye like to admit it or not. Take up embroidery for all I care.”

Juliet had heard enough. Tucking her hair under a wool cap, she swung her black cloak over her shoulders and headed for the door.

“Where are ye going?” Bran called after her.

She cast him a withering glare over her shoulder. “To find some sewing needles.”

THE BOW STREET HEADQUARTERS had once been the private

residence of Henry Fielding, a prolific author, magistrate, and founder of the runners. With the support of the Duke of Newcastle, Henry convinced the Crown to give him a yearly stipend of two hundred pounds to support the hiring of six men who he used to bring law and order to London and its outlying highways and villages.

When Henry passed his brother John took over and grew the runners to a force of nearly two dozen men, but over the past five years a decline in crime and the rise of the Metropolitan Police force had seen that number diminish by over half.

Upon his retirement, John attempted to make Grant his predecessor. Given that he was noble born with military experience he was the obvious choice, but much to John's frustration and general annoyance Grant declined the offer and so it went to Owen Steele instead, a commoner who had fought alongside Grant on the bloody battlefields of France.

During his first year as captain, Owen had proven himself to be the correct choice. He was a hard but fair man, with the patience Grant lacked to deal with all of the bureaucratic shite that came along with the position.

Mrs. Wadsworth greeted him as he stepped into the foyer. A sleek black feline, she'd lived in the three story brick house for longer than anyone could remember. Her chest rumbling with a throaty purr, she allowed Grant to pat the top of her head before she jumped down from the windowsill and trotted off towards the kitchen in search of a nibble.

Following the low murmur of masculine voices, Grant pulled off his

great coat and hat as he walked into the drawing room. A fire crackled in the hearth, warding off the chill of a gray rainy morning. Draping his coat over the back of a chair, he gave a cursory nod to the two runners sitting on either side of a long wooden table.

Running the length of the room and cluttered with a hodge podge of papers and various pieces of evidence, the table was where they conducted the majority of their meetings. In addition to the drawing room and the kitchen, there were two smaller rooms which were used mostly for storage and clerical work. Upstairs was the captain's private office and flat, as well as three more bedchambers that were used on a rotational basis depending on who was manning headquarters overnight.

"Is the captain back yet?" Grant asked, eyeing a steaming cup of coffee sitting in the middle of the table. Without asking whose it was he picked it up and took a liberal sip just as Felix Spencer strolled into the room.

"Oy," Felix protested, sharp amber gaze narrowing on Grant. With his brown hair slightly long and unkempt and the collar of his shirt unbuttoned, he looked like exactly what he was – a thief turned Bow Street Runner. "That's my bloody coffee. Get your own, ye lazy bastard."

There were not many people who would dare speak to Grant in such a fashion. As the captain's lieutenant *and* the third son of a duke, he commanded respect wherever he went. From the ballroom to Bow Street no one ever dared challenge his authority.

No one except for Spencer.

Suffice it to say that while the two men managed to maintain a civil working relationship – most of the time – there was no love lost between them. Were it up to Grant, Spencer would be rotting away in Newgate. But for reasons that baffled Owen had seen something in the thief and instead of locking him up and tossing away the key he'd offered him a job instead.

Grant would be the first to admit – albeit grudgingly – that Spencer had thus far proved himself to be an asset. As a former criminal, he had an insight into London's dark underworld that no one else did. But that didn't mean Grant had to like him.

And he certainly didn't trust him.

"Get another cup if it means that much to you," he said before he slowly and deliberately took another sip, causing Felix's eyes to narrow and his jaw to clench. Their gazes met and held, neither man willing to give quarter. They would have likely stood there all morning had Archer Brentwood not entered the room. A recent graduate of Eton, he was the youngest runner on Bow Street and it showed in both his enthusiasm and naivety. It also didn't help that his shock of red hair and smattering of freckles made him appear far younger than his nineteen years. But he had a brilliant head for numbers and the uncanny ability to see what others missed, making him a valuable part of the team.

"Good morning," he said brightly. "A bit rainy out, isn't it?"

Still holding Grant's stare, Felix gave an amicable shrug before his teeth flashed in a mocking grin. "Drink up, then. My gift to ye." Sitting down on the other side of the table, he tipped his chair back

and crossed his arms behind his head. “Ye look like ye need it.”

Belatedly sensing the tension simmering in the air, Archer stopped short. “Did I miss something?”

“Here.” Having lost his taste for coffee, Grant shoved the cup into Archer’s hand. “Is the captain in his office?”

“He got in just before you,” answered Ian Ferguson. He and his brother Colin had joined the runners around the same time as Grant. They were both broad-shouldered, strapping young men with brown eyes and dark blond hair, but that was where their similarities ended. Ian, the more serious of the two, was a man of the law whereas Colin, an affable sort of fellow who was never without a smile, preferred to dance right on the edge. “Although I don’t think he’s after seeing any visitors. Went straight upstairs without so much as a hello.”

As if on cue a door slammed above their heads, causing Archer to wince.

“Does this have anything to do with the stiff you two found in the theater district?” Grant asked Felix.

“Hell if I know. But I’ll tell ye this much – the captain’s in a right pissy of a mood. I wouldn’t go up there if I were ye.”

Grant’s mouth stretched in a flat, humorless smile. “Don’t worry, Spencer. You’ll never be me.”

CHAPTER THREE

FROM AN EARLY AGE Grant knew he was different. Not because of the fine houses and the nannies and the trips to Bath. Those things certainly helped him understand there was something unique about his family. But what *really* opened his eyes to the fact that the Hargraves were unlike anyone else was how people treated his father.

When the Duke of Readington walked into a room everyone else immediately stopped speaking. As a young boy, Grant had suspected his father yielded magic powers. Absolute rubbish, of course. But as he grew older and came to know more of the world and how it worked, he understood that being a duke was its own sort of power. And a man had to be very careful about how he wielded it.

Being the third son, Grant was as likely to inherit the ducal title as Mrs. Wadsworth. Both of his older brothers were in robust health and the eldest, Charles, had two sons of his own. Lacking for male heirs the Hargrave family was not. Which was one of the reasons Grant had never concerned himself with finding a wife and starting a family.

While most men would have cursed their lot in life had they been born third in line to one of England's oldest and most esteemed titles, Grant had always seen it as a blessing. It allowed him the freedom to seek his own path. One that had led him across continents and battlefields before steering him straight towards Bow Street.

He still remembered, with vivid clarity, the day he'd told his father what he was going to do. What he was going to become. The smell of cannon fire and the stench of death had not yet left his clothes when he approached the duke in his private study. As richly appointed as every other room at Litchfield Park, it boasted mahogany wood paneling and towering shelves filled with his father's beloved books. An oversized liquor cabinet held some of the oldest brandy in all of England, and antique brass wall sconces bathed everything in a soft yellow glow.

The heels of his boots sank silently into the thick carpet as Grant walked across the study and poured himself a drink. His father had not spoken when he'd entered the room, but as dark amber liquid filled the crystal decanter he stood up from behind his desk and raised his voice.

"Better make it two. I can see you have something you wish to discuss." It wasn't a question, but a statement. One he punctuated with a slight narrowing of his eyes.

Tall and broad shouldered, Eric Hargrave was exactly the sort of man one envisioned when they thought of a duke. His black hair had begun to gray at the temples and there were more lines creasing his face than there had been before his youngest son went off to war, but he still cut an impressive – and imposing – figure. Grant looked more like his father than either one of his brothers. Charles and Thomas had inherited their mother's fair coloring, as well as her sweeter temperament.

There was irony in that, Grant supposed. He was the most like the

duke, but he would never inherit the dukedom.

“I do,” he acknowledged as he used the decanter to fill two small glasses and held one out. He met his father’s cold, clear stare without blinking, having learned long ago that it was always better to challenge the duke head on. Any wavering would be seen as a weakness, and Eric did not abide weakness.

“If you’ve come to say you are going back to that damn war, so help me God—”

“No,” Grant interrupted with a shake of his head. “The war is over. Napoleon is finished. All that’s left is to sign the treaties.”

How simple he made it all sound. An entire war summed up in three sentences. Except there had been nothing simple about Waterloo or the bloody battles that had proceeded it.

War was not *simple*. He had discovered that the hard way. It was hell on earth, and any man who said otherwise had either never witnessed it firsthand or was lying to himself. War was chaos. War was pain. War was muddy fields trampled beneath thousands of boots and soaked in blood.

When Grant closed his eyes at night he still heard the dying screams of men. Men he had known. Men he had fought beside. Men he had carried letters home for to give to loved ones they would never see again.

But he couldn’t tell his father that. Or his mother. Or even his brothers. He wouldn’t. It was a burden to be carried only by those who had fought, and he knew no matter how much time passed he would always carry the weight of it on his soul.

“Your mother will be happy to hear that.” Eric turned to face the fireplace. The snapping orange flames illuminated his stern countenance and the rigid line of his jaw. A hard man both inside and out, the duke believed in family, personal responsibility, and self-discipline – in that order. The only person who had ever been able to bring out even an ounce of softness in him was his wife.

To look at Caroline, a soft-spoken woman no bigger than a sparrow, one would think her easily cowed by her domineering husband. And during the first few months of her marriage she had been. But then something remarkable and quite unprecedented had happened. The duke had fallen in love with his duchess...and after twenty-six years of wedded bliss there was nothing he would not do for her.

“She never slept a full night that you were gone,” Eric continued. He sipped his brandy. “The rug in our bedroom has been worn down the middle from all of her pacing. I blame you for that.” His brow creased. “It was a very expensive rug.”

“I’ll buy you another.” The corners of Grant’s mouth twitched, and he hid his smile in the curved rim of his glass. He knew that was as close as his father would ever come to admitting that he, too, had feared for his youngest son.

They were both quiet for a moment as they stared into the fire. It crackled and hissed like a living, breathing thing, the flames lapping at the logs with a desperate, primitive hunger. Skimming a hand across his chin, Grant scratched at the dark bristle he’d allowed to grow since returning to England.

“I am leaving for London at the end of the week.”

His expression pensive, Eric took another sip of brandy. “You haven’t been home for a fortnight. If it is wenches you’re after, there are plenty to be found in the village.”

Grant cast his father a sideways glance. “I’m not eighteen anymore. I’ve more on my mind than just wenches.”

“You are correct. You’re not eighteen anymore, but a man fully grown. One who has seen more of the world and what our fellow man is capable of than I ever care to.” The duke’s voice turned gruff as he looked down into his drink. “But you’re home now, son. You’ve returned to us. Surely you owe your poor mother more than a fortnight.”

How easy it would have been to stay. To take his inheritance and purchase a modest estate and live a life of gentlemanly pursuits. Find a sweet, mild-tempered lady wife and have a few squalling brats. It was, after all, what was expected of him. And because it was – because it was the *only* thing that had *ever* been expected of him – he wanted to do more.

There was a fire inside of Grant, not unlike the one that burned in the hearth. A fire that was driving him to do something that *mattered* with his life. To do something that counted. It was why he’d gone to war. Not for the glory of it, or the fame.

There was no glory or fame to be found in death.

He’d gone because it had been the right thing to do. Because his country had asked it of him, and he had been obliged to answer. Now he was answering a different call. One that would help people. One that would make a bloody *difference* in this godforsaken world.

“London isn’t France,” he said evenly. “I’ll only be but a four day’s ride away. Less if you have a fast horse. And I’ll see you soon enough when you come to town for the Season.”

“It’s not myself I am concerned with,” Eric snapped testily. “It’s your mother.”

His father’s show of temper had Grant lifting a brow. “Yes, well, you can tell *Mother* that she is welcome to visit whenever he – I’m terribly sorry, I meant whenever *she* wishes.”

“You always were an impertinent boy,” Eric muttered under his breath. Tipping his glass back, he drained the rest of his brandy and walked to the liquor cabinet to pour himself some more. “It will be Christmas soon. The first one in five years we’ve all been together under one roof. You know how your mother feels about Christmas. Surely you can stay until then.”

Grant shook his head. “I would if I could. Surely you know that. But I am needed in London.”

“Needed?” The duke scowled. “Needed by whom?”

He met his father’s gaze. “John Fielding.”

“FELIX SAID YOU WERE BACK,” said Grant as he stepped into his captain’s private office. “He also said you were in a piss of a mood.” Noting Owen’s surly expression and the shadows under his eyes, he would have to agree.

The two men had met in France when they’d both been assigned to the same infantry unit. Grant had been an officer and Owen a lowly foot soldier, delegated to putting up tents and serving meals and

polishing boots. To say they hadn't gotten on at first would have been a vast understatement.

The common born son of a baker, Owen had very personal reasons for hating the nobility and in his eyes Grant had been the worst of the worst: a fancy lord playing soldier with no intention of risking life or limb. But when Grant had saved his life and Owen had promptly returned the favor, they'd been able to set aside their differences. In the midst of a long, bloody war they had become more than fellow soldiers serving in the same unit.

They'd become friends.

That friendship had followed them back to England and eventually to Bow Street. When John Fielding began looking for a new recruit Grant could think of no one better suited for the position than his old battalion mate, and so he'd sought Owen out and convinced him to come to London.

The skills that had served both men so well on the battlefield made them perfectly suited for being runners and they'd both excelled at their jobs, so much so that before Henry announced his retirement he pulled them aside and asked if Grant would be his successor and Owen his second-in-command.

Not wanting to be chained to an office Grant had politely declined the offer, but Owen – a better man than he for willingly shouldering such a burden – had risen to the challenge which was why he was standing behind a desk and Grant was standing in front of it, hands tucked into the front pockets of his trousers and a faint grin curling the edges of his mouth.

If he tilted his head and squinted a bit he could just make out the dark cloud hanging over Owen's head. Complete with thunder and intermittent flashes of lightening. Something had crawled up his friend's arse, but he wasn't about to go searching for it. Grant knew when to pick his battles...and when to leave well enough alone.

Putting down the stack of letters he'd been organizing into neat piles, Owen lifted his head, his blue eyes as dark and impenetrable as the hidden depths of the sea. "Felix needs to learn to mind his tongue. What do you want?"

Pisser of a mood indeed.

"Just checking in on the stiff from this morning," Grant said easily. "He was a peer?"

"A viscount." Owen crossed his arms. "Lord Rodger Sherwood."

"And you think he was murdered?"

"I know he was. He fell because his girth snapped."

"That sounds more like bad luck to me." It wouldn't have been the first time a peer had gotten drunk at the theater and tried to ride home, only to find himself sprawled on the ground with his face in the muck. Or in this case sprawled on the ground with a broken neck. Unfortunate business to be sure, but nothing about it pointed to murder.

"Not when his girth was cut," Owen said matter-of-factly.

Grant whistled under his breath. "That's one way to make a murder look like an accident. Bloody clever if you ask me. Sherwood... Sherwood..." Eyes narrowing, he rubbed his chin as he struggled to place the name. He knew he'd heard it, but he couldn't remember

where. "The name sounds familiar. I'm sure I've met him before." With one foot planted in Bow Street and the other in Grosvenor Square, Grant had the unique position of being in two entirely different worlds...but not truly belonging to either one.

Jaw clenching, Owen looked as though he was about to say something else about Sherwood...but then he shook his head and abruptly changed the subject. "Did you ever catch that burglar who's been breaking into the townhouses on Thistle Street?"

Now it was Grant's teeth that grinded together. After being responsible for catching some of London's most dangerous and notorious criminals, he still couldn't believe he'd let a common jewel thief slip through his fingers. A jewel thief with the greenest eyes and softest lips he had ever seen...

Bloody hell.

What the devil was *wrong* with him?

He knew some men fancied other men. But he wasn't one of them. And he certainly wasn't after fancying young lads. For as long as Grant could remember he'd been in love with women. He adored everything about them, from their plump thighs to their soft breasts to the little mewling sound they made when they came.

Given his physical appearance and rakish charm, he'd never lacked for female companionship. Of course it also didn't hurt that he was the son of a duke *and* a Bow Street Runner. The former made him one of London's most eligible bachelors. The latter made him forbidden fruit. It was an enticingly seductive combination that he used to his advantage without any trace of guilt or remorse.

A woman knew precisely what – and what not – she was getting when she caught the wandering eye of Grant Hargrave. He never promised forever. Never even eluded to it. He may have loved women, but he wasn't the sort of man who fell *in* love. Pleasure was what he sought. Sheer, unadulterated pleasure. And out of his long string of lovers and mistresses there was not a single one who could say she'd been left wanting in his bed.

Or on his writing desk.

Or on his dining room table.

Or, in the case of one very adventurous blonde, leaning over the edge of his balcony.

He was as skilled at lovemaking as he was at avoiding marriage. And never, in all of his years, had he ever looked at a member of the same sex and felt the stirrings of lust. It just didn't make any damn *sense*. Unless the boy wasn't really a boy...

His brow creased. He knew there were female thieves. But they were usually pick pockets who stole coins and pocket watches, not priceless pieces of jewelry from some of the most well-guarded houses in all of London.

"Not yet," he said, frustration creeping into his voice as he replied to Owen's question. "I always seem to be one step behind the bugger, but he's bound to make a mistake sooner or later."

"Better make it sooner. I've got Lord Munthorpe breathing down my neck. He wants his wife's diamond necklace returned."

"Cheap bastard," Grant snorted. "As if he couldn't afford to buy her a dozen more."

“Some nonsense about the necklace being a family heirloom.” Own lifted a brow. “Either way, see to it. This has gone on long enough.”

“I agree.” The quicker he caught the lad the quicker he could put all this nonsense behind him. Then he’d never need to think about a green-eyed thief with long lashes and lush red lips ever again.

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM A BOOKSTORE across the street, Juliet watched as three runners walked out of the Bow Street office. They all wore hats and coats to ward off the light misting rain falling from a dull and dreary sky, but she was able to easily identify the one she was looking for by his sheer height...and his arrogant saunter. While the other men splashed through the puddles with all the grace of a couple of plow horses, he glided across the cobblestones as if he were strolling across a bloody ballroom.

“Got you,” she breathed, her warm breath fogging up the cold glass as she pressed her face against the window. Bran would have her head if he knew she was this close to Bow Street, but she wasn’t worried about being caught. London was a big place filled with thousands of strangers and the odds of her being noticed in a sea of faces were slim to none. Especially since the runner hadn’t gotten a very good look at her face to begin with. But that didn’t stop her from hissing a curse that would have made a sailor blush when, without any warning, he suddenly broke away from his two mates and cut straight across the street.

“Bloody hell.” Jumping back from the window, she blindly yanked

a book down from the nearest shelf and flipped to a random page just as the bell hanging over the front door gave a loud, cheerful jingle.

“Good morning sir!” The shopkeeper was a portly man with thinning hair and wire spectacles that gave him an owlsh appearance. “Bit of a dreary day, isn’t it? Although I always say this weather is perfect for reading. Right then.” He drummed his fingertips on the counter. “What can I help you with today?”

“I heard you have a first edition of *Sense and Sensibility*.”

The downy hairs on her arms tingled at the familiar sound of the runner’s deep voice. She would recognize that husky timbre anywhere. He spoke with a distinct elegance that brought to mind fancy boarding schools and silver spoons. Which was rather curious, given that the average runner was common born with minimal schooling.

Who are you? She wondered silently. *And how the devil did you find me?*

Keeping the book pressed closed to her face, she slowly tip-toed to the corner of the bookcase and peered around it. There, standing within spitting distance with his back facing her, was the runner who had come closer than any other thief-taker to slapping her in irons. Her gaze slipped past him to the door. It was so temptingly close, but she knew she’d be caught before she made it out to the pavement. Unless she came up with a distraction...or a disguise.

“A first edition, sir?” The shopkeeper sounded puzzled. “I’m not sure I understand. There has only ever been one edition published.”

“Of the completed book, yes. But I’m looking for the epistolary

novel. I believe it is titled *Elinor and Marianne*, if I am not mistaken. Presented to a publisher in 1797, but never published.”

“You are not mistaken, sir. You are not mistaken at all.” The shopkeeper’s eyes opened and closed in a flurry of blinks. “I had no idea you were such a connoisseur.”

“I fear my mother is the connoisseur, not I.” The runner leaned his forearms on the counter. “But her birthday is at the end of the month and this would make a splendid addition to her collection.”

“You may be in luck. I can make no guarantees, but I believe I might have just what you’re looking for in the back. If you would wait here for a moment, I will be right–”

“Pardon me,” Juliet said sweetly as she stepped directly behind the runner, giving the shopkeeper a solid jolt. Gasping, he jumped straight up in the air and landed with his hand pressed over his heart.

“Goodness gracious!” he cried. “I didn’t know anyone else was here.”

“I did not mean to startle you.” Her gaze flicked from the shopkeeper to the Runner and her mouth curved in a deliberately soft, shy smile when he turned and acknowledged her with a polite nod. “I was just on my way out. If you gentlemen would be so kind as to excuse me.”

She could feel the runner’s eyes on her as she stepped neatly past him and headed for the door. Which was why she forced herself to take small, ladylike steps even as every pulsing muscle in her body screamed at her to run. If he recognized her, it would be over. This wasn’t the East End. There were no alleys she could run down, or

abandoned buildings she could hide in. She was a rabbit caught out in the open while a hungry hawk circled above.

But this rabbit wasn't without its tricks.

While the runner and the shopkeeper had been conversing about some old book, she'd been busy pulling her hair out of its braid and running her fingers through the long auburn tresses so they fell over her shoulders in a luxurious veil of red silk. She'd managed to hide her shirt and trousers by tying her cloak closed at the neck, and had loosened the binding on her breasts in order to give herself a more feminine silhouette.

It wasn't a perfect disguise, but hopefully it was enough. As long as the runner didn't look at her too closely, he would have no reason to suspect she was the thief he was after. Particularly since he believed the thief he was after was a young boy.

The tiny golden bell let out a bright, cheerful jingle as she started to push the door open. But before she could escape into the rain-soaked street she felt a slight pressure on her elbow and her stomach sank like a stone when she glanced back over her shoulder and saw the runner towering above her. In the dim and the dark she hadn't been able to get a clear look at his face. Now, in the gray light of day, it was the only thing she *could* look at.

His features were bold and distinctive. Thick brows. Strikingly green eyes framed with short, spiky ebony lashes. Sharp cheekbones and a full, sensual mouth. He'd taken off his hat when he entered the store and his thick black hair was slightly flattened and pushed back from his temple, revealing a high, smooth forehead with nary a single

blemish.

He has better skin than I do, Juliet thought with disgust. And as much as she would have preferred he have a bulbous nose, large gap between his teeth, and eyes that were set too close together, there was no denying the man was sinfully handsome. It was a shame, really. If she didn't know who he was she might have been tempted to flirt with him.

Men who looked like the runner were few and far between in the East End. A woman could consider herself lucky if she found a bloke who had all of his teeth, let alone one who looked as though he'd just stepped out of a fancy Gentleman's Club.

Unfortunately, she *did* know who he was. More importantly, she knew *what* he was.

Her enemy.

"A lady should never have to open the door for herself." His throaty voice reminded her of a velvet cloak she'd stolen out of a carriage once. Sinfully soft and deep. "Here, allow me."

"That is very kind of you," she said demurely when he pushed the door open as wide as it would go, allowing in a gust of chilled air. She shivered, although the goose pimples running the length of both arms had very little to do with the rain and everything to do with the large man standing behind her. His rangy body filled the entire doorway, broad shoulders stretching from one side to the other. He frowned when he noted her quick tremble.

"Don't you have a parasol?"

"I...must have left it in my carriage."

“Let me go fetch it for you.”

How noble, she thought with the faintest of sneers. If only he'd been this gallant last night when he'd been chasing her all around St Giles.

“There's really no need. I am not made of sugar. I won't melt.” So *get the bollocks out of my way, you bloody bounder, and let me pass*, she added silently when he kept one arm braced against the door, effectively trapping her between a hard place and, well, a hard place.

“Are you sure about that?” he murmured, lowering his head ever-so-slightly to sniff at the delicate curve of her neck as if he was a dog and she was a tasty morsel he couldn't decide whether he wanted to slowly nibble or devour in one hungry gulp. “You certainly smell sweet.”

“It must be my new perfume. It's French. Very expensive.” As her stomach did the same, odd little flutter as it had the night before, she clutched the collar of her cloak and pulled it all the way up to her chin. The wolfish gleam in the runner's eyes made her feel as though she was standing before him completely naked. It was a vulnerability that had nothing to do with his occupation, and everything to do with his being such a large, attractive, virile man.

She may have been a virgin, but she wasn't ignorant. Or completely innocent. She knew of the relations that took place between a man and woman. She'd even been kissed a time or two, although those experiences had left her wondering what all the fuss was about. If lovemaking was anything like kissing – wet and jabby – she wasn't in any particular hurry to do the deed.

The first time she had seen a man and woman tugging (one couldn't

grow up in the East End and not witness all manner of perverted acts) she'd been little more than a child and so shocked she'd simply stood there and stared, rooted to the spot, until Eddy found her and dragged her away.

"What were they *doing*?" she'd asked, her green eyes wide as saucers.

Eddy, not much older than she, had struggled to stutter through an explanation. His entire face as red as a doxy's dress, he'd stared down at the ground and said, "They were having a bit – a bit of fun, is all. Grown up fun."

"It didn't sound like fun! It sounded like 'e was hurtin' her. Do ye think we should get Bran?"

"He wasn't hurtin' 'er none."

"How do ye know?"

"Because I *know*. Crikey, Jules. Jest forget about it, okay?"

But she hadn't forgotten, and with the runner towering over her it was the only thing she *could* think about. Which was just another reason why she needed to put as much distance between them as possible.

Immediately.

She'd been stupid to come here. It had been an impulsive risk she hadn't needed to take, but she had wanted – she had *needed* – to see the runner again.

Well I certainly got my wish, she thought silently as her lips thinned. *And now I'll be lucky if it doesn't cost me my life.*

"Thank you ever so much for opening the door," she said, a bit of

an edge creeping into her tone, “but if you could let me through–”

“Have we met before?” As the gleam in the runner’s eyes suddenly shifted from seduction to speculation, Juliet instinctively reached for her knife. She was fairly certain he didn’t recognize her – surely he would have done something by now if he had – but she wasn’t about to put her fate to chance.

“I am afraid not, sir. I am certain I would remember meeting someone as handsome as yourself.” Her lashes fluttered even as her hand slipped beneath the folds of her cloak and closed around the hilt of her dagger. If she could take the runner by surprise she had a chance at escaping. But she did not have the luxury of hesitation. If she was going to do something, she needed to do it now. The second he recognized her it would be too late. He’d have her wrists in shackles and her arse sitting in the magistrate’s office before she could blink twice.

With her pulse thrumming in her ears, she started to draw out her knife...

“I suppose you’re right. I would never forget a face like yours.” One emerald eye flashed in a wink, and once again her belly fluttered. She bit back a frown. Maybe she was coming down with something. Her friend Sam had been sick as a dog for the past two weeks. But if that were true, why did she only feel odd when she was around the runner?

Wonderful, she thought darkly. *He’s probably diseased.*

“Let me accompany you to your carriage,” he said, continuing to play the knight in shining armour. “Young ladies such as yourself

should not be walking alone, even in this part of town.”

With silent sigh of relief, she released the knife and clasped her hands together. Truth be told she hadn't really wanted to hurt the runner. Not because she felt anything for him. That would be ridiculous. It simply wouldn't be practical to stab him within spitting distance of Bow Street, and she was nothing if not practical.

Most of the time.

“If women are incapable of opening doors for themselves or walking down a street without a man by their side, what *are* they capable of?” she challenged, arching a brow.

A wickedly rakish grin tugged his mouth to the side. “An excellent question. Off the top of my head, I can think of nearly half a dozen things a woman is very capable of.” His voice lowered to a husky whisper. “And she wouldn't even have to leave the bedroom to accomplish them.”

It was such a Bran thing to say that Juliet nearly snickered. But then she remembered the character she was supposed to be playing and she quickly turned her snicker into a scoff.

“You have insulted my delicate female sensibilities, sir! I fear I must bid you good day.” Ducking her head, she managed to evade his arm and dart out the door. But she didn't make it more than five steps before he appeared on her right side.

“At least tell me your name.”

“Why?” she said, stepping away from him to avoid a puddle. The rain had slowed to a drizzle and the sky was beginning to clear, revealing a hazy yellow sun struggling to break through the dreary

wall of fog that perpetually blanketed the city.

“Because I’ve asked you for it. Shouldn’t that be reason enough?” He sounded genuinely puzzled that she wasn’t tripping over her own tongue to answer his question. She couldn’t say she was surprised. Looking as he did, she imagined he didn’t suffer rejection very often. Women probably threw themselves at him on a daily, if not hourly, basis.

With the exception of Juliet and her ilk, the runners were revered all over London. Women adored them. Men wanted to be them. Children idolized them. Why, she’d even seen a lady stop her carriage in the middle of the street and dash out to demand a runner sign her handkerchief! If only they knew the truth. Runners weren’t dashing, romantic heroes. They were thugs and bullies who would do well to keep their noses to themselves.

“That is not a reason at all.” Stopping short at the edge of the pavement, she glanced both ways to make sure the way was clear before she cut briskly across the street. Her unwanted shadow followed, his long legs easily keeping pace with her shorter ones.

“I will tell you my name if you tell me yours,” he said, glancing down at her with a coaxing smile that revealed the faintest hint of a dimple high on his left cheek.

Flutter, flutter.

“I do not recall asking for it. But I *do* seem to remember bidding you good day.” They marched past a baker’s shop and the sweet smell of freshly baked dough made her mouth water and her stomach grumble. When was the last time she’d eaten? If she didn’t have a

runner fastened to her hip she would have helped herself to the basket of scones sitting out on the front step to cool, and her resentment towards him grew. Maybe she *should* have stabbed him. At least then she'd be able to walk in peace.

"You're different from the usual sort, aren't you?"

"Please go away."

"Why would I do that when we're getting on so well?" He followed her around the corner, extending his stride to match hers when she tried to quicken her pace. "Where did you say your carriage was again?"

"I didn't." She stopped so suddenly he walked past her and had to turn around. Her cloak tented out around her as she rested her hands on her narrow hips and gritted her teeth. It was oh so tempting to tell him to bugger off, but cursing would hardly suit the quiet, well-mannered lady she was pretending to be. "Thank you ever so much for opening the door for me, but I really must insist—"

"Gertrude."

Juliet blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"Your name." His head canted to the side. "Is it Gertrude?"

"No." She tried to walk past him but he blocked her path, and when her furious gaze darted up to his face she found him looking down at her with a challenging grin.

"Give me two more guesses. If I guess correctly, you'll let me walk you to your carriage. If I guess wrong, I will let you pass and you need never speak to me again."

She angled her chin. "You could let me pass regardless."

“I could,” he acknowledged. “But I am not going to.”

“You are a man who is very accustomed to always getting what he wants, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he said simply.

Well at least he hadn’t denied it.

A sliver of sunlight peeked out between the clouds, reflecting off a gold button on his jacket. Like the rest of his clothes, the fawn colored greatcoat was impeccably tailored to his long, muscular frame. His snowy white cravat was expertly folded and held in place with a pin that she was willing to bet one of her own teeth was real gold. His Hessians were made of expensive calf leather and the small rowel spurs attached to the back of his heels were antique silver. The man all but stank of wealth and good breeding. Which made her wonder why – and how – he’d come to work on Bow Street.

A question for another time, she thought silently. The only thing she needed to concern herself with at the moment was getting rid of him and then getting back to the East End as quickly as possible. Being this close to Bow Street was making her skin itch.

“Oh very well, I will indulge your silly little game. But,” she warned, pointing her finger at him, “you must give me your word that if you do not guess my name you will leave me alone.”

“I swear it,” he said solemnly.

“All right then, let’s get on with it. I haven’t all blo – blessed day,” she quickly amended when she remembered who she was supposed to be. Not an orphan who’d been raised in the gutters of St Giles and had to claw and fight and scratch her way to the top of the ladder, but a

gently raised lady whose biggest obstacle in life was ensuring the lines on her embroidery were straight.

“You have to give me a clue first.”

“A *clue*?” The corners of her mouth tightened. “You didn’t say anything about a clue.”

“Didn’t I?” he said innocently.

“I think I would remember.”

“It only seems sporting, doesn’t it? Just don’t make it too easy.” He took a step towards her, crowding her back into a pile of crates filled with apples. His head lowered, and she felt the scratchy brush of his side whiskers against the side of her cheek when he leaned close and whispered, “I like a good challenge.”

Juliet froze as still and stiff as one of the marble statues in Kensington Square. He was so close she would smell the sandalwood on his skin and feel the heat pulsating from his body. Above the rigid collar of his coat the steady beat of his pulse made a mockery of her own racing heart. When she tried to draw a deep breath her lungs burned, as though all of the air had been sucked from her body. And when he tilted his head ever so slightly she was filled with the nearly irrepressible urge to press her lips to the exposed crescent of golden skin under his jaw.

No.

No, no, *no*.

This wasn’t happening. She was not attracted to a runner. Especially not *this* one! But even as her head demanded she find him repulsive in every way possible, heat in her belly made it very clear that her body

had other ideas.

Flutter, flutter, flutter.

Bloody hell.

Was *this* what Sam had meant when she'd boasted about finding a man who set her blood on fire? She'd made it sound quite pleasurable, but Juliet took no pleasure in the conflicting feelings battling away inside of her.

I think I'd rather be sick.

"Well?" His husky voice sent an unwanted spark of desire shooting from her tingling breasts all the way down to her curled toes. He lifted his hand, one finger curling around a silky auburn curl. "What's your first clue?"

"Juliet," she blurted, just wanting to get away from him as fast as possible. "My name is Juliet." Twisting to the side, she managed to squeeze between two of the apple crates. She stumbled. Nearly went down to her knees. Managed to right herself using the arm of a random gentleman walking by.

And then she ran.

CHAPTER FIVE

FOR A MOMENT Grant considered going after the red-haired beauty with the oddly familiar green eyes.

No.

Not green.

When the sun had peeked through the clouds he'd seen tiny flecks of gold in the vivid depths of her irises, making her eyes look more amber than emerald in the glittering light.

"Juliet." He spoke her name out loud, wanting to taste the sound of it on his lips. It was not a common name, although it suited her. Sweet and romantic, but with a clipped edge at the end that kept it from being too soft. Like a thistle growing in a field of wildflowers. Pretty to look at, but if you tried to touch it without gloves its thorns would draw blood.

Brow furrowing, he watched as Juliet hurried away. He wasn't accustomed to women trying to run from him, and truth be told he didn't know whether to be amused or insulted. A bit of both, he decided as she slipped around the corner of a brick building and disappeared from sight. If he didn't have somewhere to be he might

have followed her, but he had a full day ahead of him and there was no time for chasing after sharp-tongued wenches. No matter how comely they were.

Waiting for a fruit cart to lumber past, he cut back across the street and returned to the bookstore. The bell let out another jingle as he pushed open the door and the shopkeeper popped up from behind the counter holding a thin rectangular package wrapped in brown paper.

“You’re back!” he said. “Excellent. I believe I’ve found just what you’re looking for.”

“My apologies. I fear I was distracted by a pretty face.” The floorboards creaked beneath his mud splattered Hessians as he crossed the room. “Have you seen that woman in here before?”

The shopkeeper squinted at him from behind thick spectacles. “There was a woman in here?”

“Aye, a red-haired lass with – never mind.” With a bemused twist of his lips, Grant shook his head. “It doesn’t matter now. What do you have for me?”

“Here we are.” Setting the package down on the middle of the counter, the shopkeeper carefully untied the twine binding holding it closed and unwrapped the paper. “It’s not in mint condition per say,” he said with an anxious glance up at Grant. “But I personally believe that only adds to the appeal. Don’t you?”

‘Not in mint condition’ was a vast understatement, Grant thought, biting back a snort as he spread the pages out on the counter. There were about thirty in all, written on front and back in a woman’s elegant hand. The ink was faded and blurred in several spots, causing

one word to run into the next and rendering entire sentences indecipherable. Some of the pages were creased and smeared with fingerprints. One had been nearly torn in half!

“What the devil did you do to it?” he demanded, scowling at the shopkeeper.

“It wasn’t *me*, my lord. The manuscript was packed away in a wooden crate with several other novels. Unfortunately, the crate suffered considerable water damage when it fell off the roof of a carriage, which is why all of its contents were sold at auction.”

Carefully stacking one page on top of another, Grant braced his hands on the edge of the counter and regarded the shopkeeper with a steady, unblinking stare. “How much?”

“I suppose, given its condition, I could let it go for eighty.” Removing his glasses, he rubbed the lenses on the cuff of his shirt. “A bargain, really, considering the author.”

“Eighty pounds?” This time Grant didn’t bother to contain his snort. “That’s a bloody fortune. I’ll give you twenty.”

“Seventy.”

“Twenty.”

“Sixty.”

“*Twenty.*”

The shopkeeper’s face flushed a dull, mottled red. “You’re supposed to bargain with me!”

“You’re right,” he agreed with an amicable smile that fell just short of his eyes. “Twenty.”

What the shopkeeper didn’t know – but was quickly coming to

realize – was that Grant wasn't the sort of man who compromised.

On anything.

It was not a matter of the money. He may not have been as wealthy as his father (few men were), but wealth was not something that had ever concerned him. Aside from a few extravagant purchases here and there, including a fine breeding stallion he planned on putting out to stud next spring, he lived well within his means.

He had two houses, one in London and another in Surrey, as well as a small hunting lodge in Scotland that his brothers spent more time at than he did. If he wished, he could have stopped working tomorrow and lived a life of leisure, but sitting on his arse had not appealed to him as a young man fresh out of Eton and it did not appeal to him now.

"Fine," the shopkeeper muttered as he slid his spectacles back into place and glared up at Grant with the resentment of someone who was going to take what he'd been offered but wasn't happy about it. "Twenty it is."

Grant paid him and rewrapped the loose leaf pages before tucking them away inside of his coat. Reaching across the counter, he shook the shopkeeper's hand. "Thank you kindly, sir. My mother will be very pleased."

"At least someone will," the shopkeeper mumbled under his breath. "Rob a poor old man blind, why don't you. I thought runners were supposed to catch thieves, not be the ones doing the thieving."

Grant lifted a brow. He'd spent enough time in St Giles to recognize a swindler when he saw one, and he'd known from the moment he

first stepped foot in the bookstore that the gray-haired shopkeeper wasn't nearly as doddering and harmless as he appeared. "You and I both know you didn't pay more than five shillings for the entire crate."

"Two and a half." His thin lips stretched in a crafty smile. "But who's counting?"

THE DUCHESS OF READINGTON was waiting for her son in the foyer when he arrived. She'd always had a sixth sense where her three boys were concerned, and even though Grant's visit was an impulsive one she did not seem at all surprised to see him.

"Do come in and sit down," she said gaily, her soft gray eyes filled with both pride and adoration as she ushered him into the parlor. Unlike her husband, Caroline hadn't aged a day over the past twenty-seven years. Or so it seemed to Grant. A classic English beauty with ivory skin and soft blond hair she always wore in a simple twist at the nape of her neck, she was the heart that held the Hargraves together.

"I was just about to ring for tea." A knowing smile curved her lips. "Should I have Alice bring in some Shrewsbury cakes as well? Mrs. Bentley made them first thing this morning. They're still warm from the oven."

Grant grinned at his mother. "You did know I was coming, then."

"I had a feeling."

"You always do." He kissed her fair brow and gently pushed the packaged novel into her hands. "Here. This is for you. An early birthday present."

“For me?” Caroline expressive countenance registered surprise and then unbridled delight as she tore open the paper to reveal what was hidden inside. “Oh Grant! You shouldn’t have. But I am so very glad that you did! How did you know this was precisely the one I was looking for?”

He shrugged. “I had a feeling.”

She arched a brow. “Your father told you, didn’t he?”

“A runner never reveals his sources.”

“You’re a lovely boy. Have I told you that?” Standing on her toes, she pressed a chaste kiss to his cheek. “And so very thoughtful. I’ll treasure this always.”

“I am glad you like it.”

“I love it,” she corrected as she carefully wrapped the pages back inside the brown paper and set the gift aside on a small table. “Now have a seat and tell me what you’ve been doing since I saw you last. You have missed dinner two weeks in a row. I was beginning to grow worried.”

Every Sunday evening the Hargraves made a point to eat together as a family. It was a tradition Caroline had started when her boys were still young and it was one she’d insisted on maintaining even now that they were all fully grown. With the addition of his sister-in-law’s and two young nephews the dinners were often quite the circus, but Grant – to his surprise – rather enjoyed the bedlam.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” he said apologetically. “You know I would have been here if I could.” Making himself comfortable in a wide chair upholstered in rich Italian leather, he crossed his legs at the knee.

“Bow Street has been busier than usual as of late.”

Caroline sat across from her son on an elegant rose colored settee and frowned. “Nothing too dangerous, I hope.”

“Nothing out of the ordinary.” Knowing how his mother worried, he always kept the worst from her. She had no idea how many times he’d been shot at. Or the stabbing that had nearly ended his life. Or the time he’d narrowly avoided being run over by a crazed highwayman. If she knew the truth she would have demanded he leave the runners at once, and since that was something he would never willingly do, he glossed over the finer details of his work to save them both the hurt and disappointment.

“Well that’s good, I suppose.” Waiting until after the tea and Shrewsbury cakes were brought in to change the topic of conversation, she stirred a lump of sugar into her cup and said (in a very nonchalant sort of voice), “Have you by chance received your invitation?”

“And what invitation would that be?” Grant said dryly, not fooled for a minute by his mother’s innocent façade. “The one to the Hayworth dinner party or Lord and Lady Dashwood’s?”

“You’re going to the Dashwood’s ball tomorrow tonight?” she said brightly. “How splendid.”

“No, that is not what I—”

“Your father is going to be so very pleased. He was just telling me yesterday that he doesn’t see you enough. This will give you both an excellent opportunity to spend some quality time together.”

“One hour,” he said grudgingly. “I’ll attend for one hour.”

“Four.”

“One and a half.”

“Two.”

“Excellent!” Caroline set her cup down and clapped her hands together in delight. “I will let Lady Dashwood know to expect one more.”

He regarded her with suspicion. “You wanted me to attend for two hours the entire time, didn’t you?”

The Duchess of Readington may have been sweet as spun sugar, but when she wanted something she was like a terrier with a bone. Now that her first two sons were happily wed she’d set her sights on finding a wife for Grant. He went along with her matchmaking schemes because it made her happy, and because he didn’t have the heart to tell her he was *already* married...to his work. And Bow Street was the jealous sort who barely allowed him time for a mistress, let alone a wife.

“I think we both know the answer to that.” Her smile just the tiniest bit smug, Caroline bit into a Shrewsbury cake and dabbed the corners of her mouth with a napkin. “Would you like to share a carriage?”

“I’ll meet you there. I have some business to attend to and I may be a little late.”

“Not *too* late or you will miss Lady Dorothea’s piano recital before the ball.”

“The horror,” he said dryly.

“The poor dear cannot carry a tune,” Caroline acknowledged, “but she is a lovely dancer. And if I’m not mistaken, Miss Catherine Evans

will be attending as well. You remember her, don't you? Her parents are dear friends of ours. Why, I remember when you two were children! You used to play together all the time. She has grown up into a beautiful young woman, don't you agree?"

Knowing a trap when he saw one, Grant decided now was an excellent time to take his leave.

"Thank you for the tea," he said as he rose to his feet. "I'm glad you enjoyed your present. I will see you tomorrow evening."

"You're leaving so soon?" she protested. "But you only just got here."

"No rest for the wicked. Give Father my best."

"Do be careful." Caroline followed him back out into the foyer. "You know how I worry."

"You shouldn't." Tucking his hat under his arm, he leaned down and kissed the line furrowing her brow. "I can take care of myself. What time should I arrive?"

"Don't you have your invitation?"

"I must have lost it." *Or tossed it out the window.*

"Indeed," Caroline said with a look that told him he was not fooling anyone, least of all her. "The ball will begin at half past nine, but Lady Dorothea's recital will be held at seven in the drawing room followed by a light supper."

Over two hours of off-key warbling? He grimaced at the thought.

"Half past nine it is."

"Grant—" his mother began, rolling her eyes in exasperation.

"Got to go," he said cheerfully. "Criminals to catch and all that."

“What about Miss Evans?” she called after him. “I think the two of you will have a lot to discuss! Lady Chatworth will be there as well. You know her, don’t you? And Miss Browning! We mustn’t forget about her. Or what about...”

Her voice faded away, lost to the wind as Grant made his escape.

Bloody hell. One more minute and she’d have had him engaged to half of London! He knew his mother meant well, but he didn’t know how many more of these dinner parties and balls he could take. Each one was exactly the same as the last. Bloody waste of time, if you asked him. And yet another reason why he loved being a runner more than he did a nobleman.

No day on Bow Street was ever the same as the last. There were no mindless social engagements to get through. No piano recitals to endure. No prattling gossip to ignore. If he could have left that world behind him he would have done so gladly, but that would have also meant leaving his family.

Which meant for the indeterminable future he would continue to do what he’d always done: find a balance between both worlds. But he knew the day was coming where he would have to choose one or the other. Bow Street or the *Ton*. Being a runner or a being nobleman. Just as he knew that no matter which one he picked, he would be disappointing someone he loved.

“I DO NOT KNOW what to do with him.” Leaning back against her husband’s chest, Caroline sighed as she watched her youngest son walk briskly away. He had the long, ground covering stride of his

father. *As well as his stubbornness*, she thought as she tilted her head back and met Eric's comforting blue gaze.

"There is nothing *to* do, I'm afraid. Grant needs to travel his own path." Wrapping his arms around his slender wife, he rested his chin on top of her head. "He always has."

"If he had a wife..." she trailed off, bemused by her son's refusal to settle down and raise a family. Ever since she was a young girl, the only thing she'd wanted to do was fall in love, get married, and have a family of her own. The perfect happily-ever-after. Needless to say it hadn't gone *precisely* as she'd hoped – did anything in life ever go according to plan? – but it had all worked out in the end.

She was married to the duke of her dreams, she had three wonderful sons and two darling grandchildren. Why shouldn't she want the same for Grant? She knew his life as a runner was important to him and she was proud of the selfless work he was doing (even though she suspected it was far more dangerous than he let on). But she did not understand why he couldn't at least *look* for a wife. She'd presented him with plenty of options, hadn't she? Sweet, lovely, well-mannered girls which any man would consider himself lucky to marry.

Grant had scarcely given a single one of them a second glance.

"Not every man needs a wife," said Eric.

"You did," she pointed out, twisting in his arms until they were face to face. She arched a brow. "Even if you didn't realize it at the time. '*This is nothing by a marriage of convenience*'," she said in a deep voice. "*I am incapable of love.*"

"I was a fool," he said without hesitation.

Caroline's mouth curved. "I believe the word I used was 'dolt'."

He tucked a golden curl behind her ear, his thumb lingering on the curve of her jaw as he gazed deeply into her soft gray eyes. "Do you know you're as beautiful as the day I married you?"

She swatted his hand away. "Do not try to distract me. We are discussing our wayward son and his refusal to find a bride."

"Grant will find a wife when he's ready. There's no use in badgering him."

"I am not *badgering* him," she protested.

Eric simply notched a brow and waited.

"Oh all right, maybe I was badgering just a *little*. But don't you want him to be happy?"

"He is happy."

"He *thinks* he's happy," she countered, lifting her finger for emphasis. "But that's only because he hasn't met the love of his life yet."

Recognizing the determined gleam in his wife's gaze all too well, the duke felt a twinge of sympathy for his youngest son. If Grant hadn't put him through hell and back when he'd gone off to war, he would almost be tempted to warn him.

Almost.

"Haven't you heard it's best to let sleeping dogs lie?"

Caroline pursed her lips. "A little nudge here and there isn't going to hurt anything."

As his gaze dipped to his wife's breasts, Eric's mouth curved in wolfish agreement. "You're right about that," he murmured huskily

before he cupped her shapely bottom and pulled her against his growing arousal.

“What are you doing?” she gasped even as she pressed herself against him. After thirty years of marriage the fire between them still burned, and she’d never been able to resist the heat of the flames. “It’s the middle of the day!”

“And?” Grinning, he scooped her up into his arms and bounded up the stairs.

CHAPTER SIX

“ARE YE SURE ye want to do this now?” Standing in the middle of Juliet’s bedchamber with his arms crossed, Bran scowled at her as she tried to figure out which weapon would fit best under her gown.

All of them, she decided as she propped her bare foot on the edge of the bed and started to pull up her skirts. “Do you mind?” she snapped, glaring at Bran over her shoulder.

He snorted. “As if ye have anythin’ worth looking at. I’ve seen curvier thighs on a chicken.”

But he averted his gaze as she strapped two daggers to her left leg and a small pistol to her right. Tightening the leather straps to ensure nothing would come loose, she dropped her foot and shook her out skirts.

Stolen from a house in the fashionable Wayfair District, the sea green evening gown was trimmed with white lace and pearls. It was pretty enough, she supposed, although when she’d put it on she’d felt as though she were stepping into a cage. One with puffed sleeves and a soft muslin overlay, but a cage nevertheless.

“You can look now.” Sticking her hands on her hips, she squared her shoulders expectantly. “Well, what do you think?”

An ominous line appeared between Bran’s wheat colored brows as

his gaze swept her from top to bottom. “I *think* this is a bloody bad idea.”

After Juliet’s close call with the runner yesterday morning, she’d told Bran everything. Once he had finished shouting at her, he’d demanded she lay low until the imminent threat of danger had passed. But Juliet had no intention of sitting on her arse. She wasn’t going to let a near brush with Newgate or a handsome runner dictate her actions. Not that she thought of the runner as handsome. In fact, she’d hardly thought of him at all since their little run-in at the bookstore.

Well, maybe a *few* times.

Or every five minutes.

Try as she might, she could not forget the green sharpness of his eyes or the way she had trembled in response to his touch. She knew it was ridiculous. She knew it was dangerous and stupid and reckless. But *knowing* something and *feeling* it were two very different things. Her body craved what her mind knew she could never have. It was a troubling contradiction; one she intended to solve by doing what she did best: stealing.

“It will be an easy make. Are you saying I can’t do it?” she dared Bran with a challenging tilt of her chin. The thief muttered a curse under his breath.

“I know ye can,” he said between gritted teeth. “But I don’t see why ye are. Ye have a runner hot on your heels. And not just any runner. You’ve the bloody Wolf after you!” His eyes flashed. “The bastard is relentless, Jules. He won’t give up until you’re locked up in Newgate. The best thing you can do is keep your damn head down and pray he

forgets about you.”

Juliet had a talent for drawing, and after she'd sketched out a rough profile of the runner in question, emphasizing his thick brows and strong jawline, Bran had immediately known who he was.

He'd revealed that her pursuer was none other than Lord Grant Hargrave, third son of the powerful Duke of Readington. In the back alleys of St Giles he was known as The Wolf for his tenacity and vicious bite. It was said that once he caught someone's scent they might as well turn themselves in because he wasn't going to stop until he had them in irons. But she wasn't afraid. Not of him, not of any man. And she was going to prove it.

“Keep my head down?” she said with an incredulous snort. “I'd rather cut it off. I am not going to stop doing what I am best at just because of a *runner*.”

“Not jest any runner,” Bran reminded her. “The Wolf is second-in-command.”

Her mouth curled in a sneer. “He could be the bloody magistrate for all I care and it wouldn't make a difference. You said he catches every thief he goes after?”

“Aye,” Bran said curtly.

“Well, I was right under his nose and he didn't catch me.” Sitting on the edge of the bed, she pulled on stockings and a pair of sturdy leather ankle boots. No flimsy silk slippers for *this* damsel. Juliet may have been attending a ball, but she had no intention of dancing.

“At least let me go with ye.”

“No,” she said without bothering to look up.

“Why not?” Bran demanded.

“Because one woman by herself isn’t going to attract attention, but a great big boulder trying to look down the dress of anyone with tits will.” Standing, she made certain her skirts were long enough to cover her unconventional choice of footwear before she went to the floor length looking glass in the corner of the room and studied her reflection with a critical eye. “What do you think? Think I’ll pass as a lady?”

She’d managed to tame her unruly locks into a twisted chignon on the top of her head, leaving the slender line of her neck exposed. The cut of the gown was modest, allowing only the smallest hint of bosom to peek out above the lace-trimmed bodice. Small pearls swung from her ears and a matching necklace enclosed her throat.

She had more scandalous dresses. Flashier jewelry as well. But she wasn’t trying to stand out, she was trying to blend in. And to do that she needed to look like every other forlorn wallflower sitting dejectedly in the corner of the ballroom.

“Ye don’t look terrible,” Bran conceded after a long pause. “But I still think drawing attention to yourself is a ruddy bad idea. A ring isn’t worth a lifetime of sitting behind bars pickin’ maggots out of your food.”

She met his gaze in the mirror’s silvery reflection. “It is when it’s worth two hundred pounds.”

“Emerald?”

“Ruby.” She waited a beat. “With diamonds.”

Bran rocked back on his heels and whistled. “Rubies *are* fetching

the most blunt down on James Street. Ye have a buyer in mind?"

"Two," she said smugly. "They're bidding against each other as we speak."

"Ye always were a clever girl."

"And don't you forget it." Turning away from the looking glass, she poked a finger into the middle of his chest. "I'll be fine, Bran. I know what I'm doing."

"Aye," he muttered under his breath as she swung a velvet lined cloak over her shoulders and sauntered out of the room. "That's what I'm afraid of."

A LIGHT DRIZZLING rain fell from a dark and starless sky as footmen dressed in matching livery struggled to direct a long line of carriages that wrapped all the way around the block. One at a time the carriages pulled up to the front of a large brick townhouse in the middle of Berkley Square and men and women, dressed in their evening best, were quickly escorted inside under the cover of oversized pink umbrellas.

It was quite a sight to see – the umbrellas bobbing and weaving, the ladies trying to cover their hair, the lords slipping and sliding on the wet pavement – and Juliet bit back a snicker as she observed the organized chaos from behind a large marble pillar.

She'd arrived before the first carriage and chosen her lookout spot with care. The narrow portico tucked around the side of the house gave her an excellent vantage point of the front walkway. When the first strains of a dignified waltz flowed through the open door,

indicating the ball had finally begun, she slipped out from behind the pillar and stepped seamlessly into a chattering group of five young debutantes and their chaperones.

“Wonderful night, isn’t it?” she asked a freckled-faced brunette.

“It’s *raining*,” the brunette replied plaintively.

“So it is.” They had nearly reached the grand foyer where the butler was looking at invitations. Keeping her head turned slightly to the side, Juliet smiled engagingly at the brunette and said in an exaggerated whisper, “Have you heard who is going to be here tonight?”

“No,” the brunette whispered back, her eyes widening. “Who?”

Juliet’s gaze darted left and right. “I don’t know if I should say it.”

“Say it!” The brunette clutched her arm just as they reached the butler. One of the chaperones, an older woman with stern lines around the edges of her mouth, thrust a handful of invitations at him.

“I’m really not sure...”

“Please!” the brunette begged.

“Oh, very well.” She peeked at the butler. He was furtively trying to match each invitation with a chaperone and her charge, but with a quick glance at the long line of disgruntled peers waiting to be let in he gave up and gestured them all inside with a flustered sweep of his arm.

“*Finally.*” Lifting her chin, the elderly matriarch and apparent ringleader of the group sailed past him and into the foyer while her little ducklings, including Juliet, waddled obediently behind.

“Well?” the brunette hissed in her ear as they were directed down a candlelit hallway and up a set of stairs. “Who is it? The Earl of Averley? The Duke of Haversham?”

They reached the top of the staircase to discover a massive set of double doors guarded by two footmen. At the matriarch’s curt nod the footmen opened the doors to reveal the ballroom, a massive space with glittering chandeliers, polished wooden floorboards, and dozens of guests swirling about in a myriad of pastel colors.

Chairs filled with dejected looking wallflowers lined one long wall and tables overflowing with a veritable feast of pies and sweets occupied the other. A quartet of musicians played on a raised stage in the middle of the room and at the far end a series of glass doors framed by potted miniature orange trees led out to a stone terrace.

It was clear the Dashwood’s had not spared a single expense. Candles glowed in every window. The stage was draped in red velvet. Even the floor was decorated in elaborate swirls of chalk. Juliet had to blink twice when she saw a peacock go strutting by, its feathered tail proudly fluffed into a blue and green crown.

“You know, I’ve quite forgotten.” Her stomach rumbling when she spied a platter of fruit tarts, she brushed past the brunette without a second glance. Walking along the wall in order to avoid the couples who were dancing, she nabbed a flute of champagne off a passing tray and sipped the bubbly golden beverage as a slow, satisfied smile curled her lips.

Well, she thought silently. That was bloody easy.

Most thieves preferred to work under the cover of darkness when

the house was empty and everyone was asleep. Felix had been the one to teach her that it was actually easier to steal when everyone was wide awake...and distracted.

If anyone caught her where she wasn't supposed to be – in Lady Dashwood's dressing room, for instance – all she needed to say was that she'd gotten turned around on her way to powder her nose. No one would think her unusual or suspicious. If everything went according to plan, no one would think of her at all. By the time Lady Dashwood realized her prized ring was missing, Juliet would have already sold it.

“Pardon me,” she said politely as she stepped between two young debutantes on her way to the refreshments. Just because she'd come to the ball to steal a priceless piece of jewelry didn't mean she could not enjoy herself while she was here. A ring was a pleasing enough prize on its own, but a ring *and* a blackberry tart?

Heaven.

Picking the biggest, juiciest tart of the whole bunch, she wrapped it in a cloth napkin to avoid getting crumbs on her dress and wandered over to a far corner where she had an unobstructed view of the festivities. The first waltz was just ending and the lords bowed to their ladies before they went off in search of their next partner.

As she nibbled on the end of her tart, she couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to live a life of such extravagant leisure. *Trivial and boring*, she decided as she watched a trio of young women eagerly awaiting their knights in shining armor to glide up and save them from a fate worse than death: an empty dance card.

Didn't they ever grow weary of the monotony of it all? Juliet had snuck into enough balls to know that every one of them was exactly the same as the last. Chaperones presented their charges like fish thrown up on the docks, debutantes preened and batted their lashes, and arrogant nabobs in desperate need of a dowry to save their crumbling estates fought over the best of the lot while the rest sat on their rumps looking positively miserable.

Why anyone would willingly subject themselves to such a torture was baffling. Even *more* baffling was the fact that they did it week after week, month after month, season after season. More money than they knew what to do with and this was what they spent it on. Fancy tarts and pretty peacocks and fountains of champagne.

Not that she was complaining about the tarts.

Or the champagne, for that matter.

"I'll take one more of those, thank you." Plucking a crystal flute off the tray of a passing servant, Juliet brought it to her lips and took a slow, measured sip. The bubbles rested on her tongue before sliding down her throat in a delightfully frothy wave.

She would wait another half hour or so – just long enough for the rest of the guests to arrive – before she went looking for Lady Dashwood's dressing room. She didn't anticipate it being hard to find. All the townhouses in Berkley Square had been built within five years of one another, and beneath the wall hangings and the curtains and the paintings each house was almost exactly the same. Once you'd robbed one, you'd robbed them all.

Content to stand in the corner, drink champagne, and finish her

blackberry tart, she leaned back against the wall and muffled a yawn. Maybe she should have allowed Bran to come, if only to provide entertainment. She still didn't know why he had been so concerned for her welfare. He knew she was the best thief in all of London. Even better than him, though he'd rather cut out his tongue than admit as much out loud. Did he really think she was going to let herself be caught by a runner? The bastards had been after her for years and this one wasn't any different than the rest, no matter what they called him.

The Wolf.

She rolled her eyes. After how easily she'd evaded him in St Giles, the runner was more akin to a slow lumbering bear than a savage beast. Although he did have the eyes of a wolf. Sharp and cunning, with just a sly hint of sensual promise. The rest of his body was wolfish as well. Rangy and muscular, with a broad chest that tapered down to a flat abdomen and...

Champagne sloshed over the edge of the flute and ran down her knuckles in a frothy spill of white when her hand bobbed.

"Blast and *damn!*"

Stealing the ring was supposed to distract her from the runner but here she was, thinking about him yet again. At least she'd gone longer than five minutes this time.

Her loud curse had turned more than a few heads, but they quickly snapped back around when she bared her teeth. Stuffing the rest of the tart into her mouth, she tossed back what was left of the champagne and stalked away, ignoring the volley of stares that were

burning a hole in the middle of her back.

So much for remaining inconspicuous. Young ladies of good breeding didn't randomly shout out swear words. Although she was willing to bet these sort of events would be *much* more entertaining if they did.

Deciding enough time had passed, she cut a random path through the middle of the floor, turning left and right to avoid being trampled by overenthusiastic lords trying to impress flush-faced ladies. She'd nearly made it to the other side when she suddenly felt a weight dragging on her left elbow. Glancing down, she stopped short when she saw a large hand wrapped around her upper arm.

Annoyed that some hoity nabob had the gall to touch her without permission, she whirled to face him, a scathing insult burning the tip of her tongue...only to have it turn into a gasp of surprise when she looked up and found herself staring into a pair of glittering green eyes. A pair of very *familiar* glittering green eyes.

"Miss Juliet. What an unexpected pleasure." Lord Grant Hargrave, also known as The Wolf, also known as her enemy and the very bane of her existence, grinned down at her as the grip he had on her elbow tightened ever-so-slightly. "I did not realize you were an acquaintance of the Dashwood's."

"Y-yes," she managed to croak. "I am."

Blast and damn, she repeated silently as her mind raced and her shoulders stiffened. What was he *doing* here? Did he suspect she was the thief he was looking for? Had he come to arrest her? To drag her down to Newgate and toss her in a cell and throw away the key?

She was one breath away from yanking up her skirts and brandishing her pistol when she happened to note the cut of his black jacket and the gold buttons on his waistcoat. The hard knot of tension between her shoulder blades unraveled as relief coursed through her. Why, he wasn't here as a runner at all! He'd come as a peer. A sinfully handsome one wearing a snowy white cravat, double-breasted silk waistcoat, and fawn colored breeches that fit his powerful thighs like a glove...

Swallowing, she yanked her gaze back up to his face and felt the unfamiliar heat of a blush spreading across her cheeks when the amused glint in his eye revealed that he'd caught her staring.

"Like what you see?" he murmured, one corner of his mouth lifting.

"No." She tried to pull her arm free, but his grip – while not painful – was unyielding. He had long, elegant fingers that ended in neatly trimmed nails. Given the way he was dressed one would think he had the soft hands of a gentleman, but she could feel the brush of a callous against her sensitive skin.

Despite his finery, Grant Hargrave was as much a gentleman as *she* was a lady. They'd both come to the ball with parts to play...and when the curtain fell across the stage she was determined to have the final bow.

"You ran away from me yesterday." It wasn't a question, but a statement. One he punctuated with a subtle lift of his brow. "Did I do or say something to upset you?"

She gave a careless shrug. "I recalled an appointment I was late for."

“It must have been a very important one,” he said, the dry tone of his voice indicating he didn’t believe her for a moment. Which was perfectly fine. He did not have to believe her. But he *did* need to let her go. She couldn’t exactly sneak into Lady Dashwood’s bedchamber with a runner in tow!

“It was.” She looked pointedly over his shoulder. “In fact, I have just recalled another appointment I am late for.” But when she tried to walk past him he drew her back with a husky laugh that made her grit her teeth even as heat pooled in her belly.

“You’re not getting away from me that easily.” His hand slid slowly down her arm until his fingers closed around her small wrist. “Dance with me, Juliet.”

She tried to yank her arm away but he held fast. Jaw clenching, she glared up at him. “Let me go.”

“Dance with me first, and then I will.” A wicked gleam darkened his gaze. “Maybe.”

Her eyes widened. “This is not a *negotiation*. Release me this instant!”

“Or what?” he challenged with an insolent smirk.

Or I’ll stab you in the thigh, she thought silently.

No, she couldn’t do that. His thighs were so muscular her knife would probably bounce right off. The same with his abdomen. And his chest. She gritted her teeth. Bugger it, she might as well just shoot him and be done with it. Except she couldn’t. Not unless she wanted to buy herself a one-way note straight to Newgate. Which meant she had no choice. She *had* to dance with him.

But she didn't have to like it.

"Fine," she said between clenched teeth. "But just once, and then you have to promise to leave me alone."

"You know," he said conversationally as he led her back towards the middle of the ballroom, "not to appear arrogant, but most women would jump at the chance to dance with an eligible bachelor. Particularly one who still has all of his teeth." Flashing her a grin, he tapped a nail against a shiny white incisor. "See?"

Juliet's mutinous gaze dropped to his mouth and then jerked back up to his twinkling green eyes. "I'm not most women."

"I can see that." He shifted closer as the quartet began to play, forcing her to take a step back less she wanted her breasts to brush against his chest. Which she definitely did not want them to do. Not at all. Not even a tiny bit.

Well, maybe a *teensy* tiny bit.

"What are you doing?" she asked warily when he slid his arm behind her waist.

"Waltzing," he said simply as he joined his right hand to her left. All around them couples were striking similar poses, although none of them – with the exception of a dainty blonde and her dark-haired partner – were standing so close together.

Her eyes narrowed. "This is not a version of the waltz I am familiar with."

Knowing it would come in useful at some point, she'd paid a doxy five pounds to teach her how to dance. The lessons had been rudimentary at best, but Juliet had always been quick on her feet and

she'd been able to piece together whatever steps Abigail – a governess who'd fallen on hard times – hadn't been able to remember.

But in all their lessons she couldn't recall any type of waltz that required a gentleman's hand to rest quite so familiarly on the small of a woman's back. A few inches further down and Grant would be cupping her arse!

"It's all the fashion in France," he said with a roguish wink as he expertly navigated them around the room.

"You've been to France?" she said, unable to keep the envy out of her tone. Having never been outside of England – or London, for that matter – she yearned to see more of the world.

"I was stationed there for a brief period of time after Napoleon's defeat."

"*You* fought in the war?" she asked, surprised by the unexpected admission. What sort of lord risked life and limb in a war he did not have to be a part of, and then returned home to work for the Bow Street Runners? It didn't make any bloody sense. Nothing about him did. The more she came to learn about him, the more she discovered how much of a contradiction he was.

"Yes," he said curtly, the tick of muscle high in his right cheek indicating he did not care to pursue the topic any further.

What a mystery you are, she thought silently. A mystery she wanted no part in solving. Whatever Grant's reasons for going to war, it did not change the fact that he was a runner and she was a thief. They were sworn enemies and were it not for the fact that he hadn't the faintest idea who she *really* was, he'd have her clapped in irons within

the minute. Something she would do well to remember the next time she gazed deeply into his eyes and felt a keen stirring of lust.

Rather like she was doing right now.

Blast it all, Jules! Pull yourself together.

Thankfully the waltz was coming to end. As the music swelled and then faded away, Grant let go of her waist but kept her hand clasped firmly in his. Lowering his chest in a deep bow, he brought her fingers to his lips.

“A conversation for another time, my lady.”

Flustered by his kiss and the warmth rapidly spreading up her arm, Juliet yanked her hand away. “If you recall, there will not *be* another time. I gave you your dance. Now you have to leave me alone.”

“Do I?” he challenged.

“If you are a man of your word.”

“Let it never be said I am any less than that.”

Their eyes met for the length of a heartbeat, and in that moment Juliet quite simply forgot how to breathe. Mesmerized by Grant’s emerald gaze, she felt the same pull deep inside that she felt when she looked at a priceless jewel. A sort of desperate yearning that came from the very depths of her soul. She wondered if the runner felt it as well, and was given her answer when he gently cupped her chin, his arrested stare never leaving hers.

“Juliet...” he began huskily.

“I’m sorry. I – I have to go.” Wrenching free of his grasp, she turned and bolted into the crowd. Keeping her chin down, she all but ran to the far end of the ballroom, fighting the entire time not to look back

over her shoulder, afraid if she did she would be no better off than the woman who had turned to salt.

But when she reached the double doors she couldn't help but glance behind her. Chest rising and falling with the force of her breaths, she searched for Grant's tall frame amidst the crush of ball gowns and black tailcoats, but he must have stepped out onto the terrace for he was nowhere to be seen.

Good, she told herself firmly as she straightened her bodice and tucked a loose curl behind her ear. No matter how handsome or charming he was, the runner remained just that – a runner. He was a dangerous distraction she could ill afford, and it was high time forgot about him and focused on what *really* mattered.

“Pardon me,” she said pleasantly to the footman standing beside the door. “Could you be so kind as to direct me to the lady's dressing room? I need to powder my nose...”

CHAPTER SEVEN

CALL IT INSTINCT. Call it a sixth sense. Call it a runner's intuition. Whatever it was called, Grant *knew* there was more to Juliet than met the eye. Which was why he discreetly followed her out of the ballroom and down the hall, keeping just enough distance between them so if she happened to glance back over her shoulder he'd have time to duck into a doorway. When she went into the lady's dressing room – nothing out the ordinary there – he waited around the corner, hands tucked casually behind his back and a pensive line creasing his forehead.

From the moment he'd spied the vibrant gleam of her auburn hair across the room he'd been assuaged with the same sense of troubling familiarity that he had felt in the bookstore. It plagued him now as it had then, forcing him to wrack his mind for a memory that remained stubbornly out of reach. Surely if he had met Juliet before yesterday he would have remembered, as her face was not one a man could easily forget. The delicate features, impudent little mouth, and tip-tilted eyes were as unique as her fiery mane. In all his years, he'd never seen her equal. Which was why he *knew* she had to be a stranger. And yet...

He stared hard at a flickering wall sconce while he considered the possibilities. Having always possessed an analytical mind, even as a young child, he knew the easiest way to solve a problem was to simply add two and two together. Too often people tried to make things more complicated than they needed to be. But every time he tried to add Juliet up, he kept getting five. Or seven. Or twelve.

Maybe it was nothing more than raw attraction that had him on edge. But that did not explain where Juliet had come from, or how she was able to flit about London without a proper chaperone, or who her parents were. He knew they must have been both wealthy and titled – the Dashwood's did not acquaint themselves with those they considered 'lower quality' – but what were their names? Come to think of it, what was *Juliet's* name?

Intuition – the same intuition that had served him well on the battlefields and in the alleys – told him there was something he was missing. Something he was overlooking. So what the devil was it?

Grinding his teeth in frustration, he leaned back against the wall as he waited for her to reemerge from the dressing room, his fingers tapping out an absent rhythm against his thigh. When he heard the creak of a door and the low, whispery murmur of female voices he tensed, but it was only two young debutantes on their way back to the ballroom.

"Oh!" the taller one gasped as they rounded the corner and saw Grant lurking in the shadows. "You frightened us."

"My apologies." His manners as impeccable as his attire, he stepped forward and bowed. "I did not mean to startle you. I am waiting for a

friend.”

The two debutantes exchanged a quick glance.

“But there was no one in the dressing room except for us,” the shorter one said.

“And our chaperone,” the taller one added. “Although I fear she’s fallen asleep in front of the fireplace again.”

“She does that *every* time.”

“Too much elderberry wine.”

“Mother is going to so *very* annoyed.”

“Do you think she’ll finally sack her?”

“Maybe. But that will be the third one this season!”

“I rather liked the last one.”

“Not me. She never let me eat any sweets.”

“Only because you’ve had to have all your waistlines let out.”

“That’s not true!”

“It is. First the blue dress and then—”

“Wait.” Grant held up his hand as his head began to pound. “Are you certain there’s no one else in the dressing room?”

“Just our chaperone,” the tall debutante said.

“There wasn’t a woman with red hair?”

They exchanged another glance, this one longer than the first.

“What?” he said, his gaze sharpening as he sensed there was something they weren’t telling him. “What is it?”

The short one spoke up. “She said there was a – what did she call him, Jane?”

“I can’t repeat it!” Jane said indignantly. “*You* say it.”

“I can’t say it. Mother will wash my mouth out with soap!”

Grant raked a hand through his hair. “*Someone* say it,” he growled. This was precisely why he loathed balls and avoided them at all costs. Because they were filled with chattering magpies who loved to use twenty words when two would easily suffice. No wonder they were so bloody obsessed with singing recitals.

They needed to build up their lung strength.

Casting a furtive glance to the left and right, Jane lowered her voice to a croaking whisper and said, “She told us a – a ratbag bastard was following her and if we distracted him she’d introduce us to the Duke of Beaumont.”

Son of a bitch.

Grant might have been tempted to think that being called a ratbag bastard twice in three days was nothing more than a random coincidence...if he believed in coincidences. Since he did not, there were only two explanations.

Either Juliet was friends with the jewel thief from St Giles and she’d picked up a few of the lad’s more colorful phrases.

Or Juliet *was* the jewel thief from St Giles.

Two plus two...

“I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this, but there is no Duke of Beaumont.”

His eyes darkened as he thought of how she must have laughed at him when he’d followed her out of the bookstore. Then again tonight when he’d asked her to dance. Juliet had played him like a bloody fool and he’d fallen for her charms like a fish swallowing a rotten

piece of bait.

“You mean we’ve been duped?” Jane cried in dismay.

“Yes,” he said grimly as he reached for his pistol. “And so have I.”

Like stealing sweets from a baby, Juliet thought as she sauntered into Lady Dashwood’s private bedchamber. Not that she’d ever do such a thing. What sort of monster stole from children? Now rich nabobs who were too stupid to lock their doors...that was another story all together.

The only source of light in the lavishly appointed room came from a fire smoldering in the hearth. Juliet’s shadow rippled across a life-sized painting of Lady Dashwood lounging on a velvet settee as she tip-toed to a dressing table carelessly strewn with hair ribbons, jewelry, and perfume bottles.

Picking up a gold brooch at random she tested the weight of it in her hand, and then with a shrug tucked it into one of the hidden pockets she’d sewn into her gown. Just because she’d come for a ring didn’t mean that was the only thing she had to leave with.

A pair of pearl earrings followed the brooch, as well as a diamond encrusted butterfly pin.

“Now,” she said softly, “if I were a priceless ruby ring, where would I be?”

As it turned out, not on the dressing table. Or in the armoire or the closet or stuck between the cushions of the chaise lounge. Crossing the room, she began to run her fingers along the wall, searching for any mark or depression that would indicate a secret panel. She knew the

ring was here somewhere. It had to be. If this had all been for nothing...

"*There you are.*" Her eyes brightened when her thumb pressed a hidden latch and a small drawer popped out of the wall. In the drawer was a mahogany box inlaid with ivory. Carrying the box over to the bed, she unceremoniously dumped its contents onto the ivory duvet. But to her disappointment, the only things to fall out were a handful of coins and an engraved pocket watch.

"Blast and damn," she hissed, stomping her foot in frustration. Where the devil was the ring? She'd turned the bedchamber inside out and there was no sign of it anywhere. She knew Lady Dashwood wasn't wearing it. When she'd glided past in the ballroom her fingers had been bare save a small gold band. Dropping to her hands and knees, Juliet lifted a corner of the duvet and peered under the bed.

Empty.

Sitting back on her haunches, she blew a loose tendril of hair out of her eyes. Lady Dashwood must have given the ring to a friend, because it definitely wasn't in her bedchamber. Which meant the entire evening was a bloody waste.

Maybe not a complete waste, a tiny voice in her head whispered slyly. *You got to dance with The Wolf, didn't you? Deny it all you want, but you know you enjoyed yourself.*

"Sod off," she told the voice irritably. She hadn't danced with Grant because she'd wanted to. She'd danced with him because it would have attracted too much unwanted attention if she had given him the cut direct.

Yes. That was it. It definitely hadn't had *anything* to do with how dashing he'd looked in his black formal attire or the flare of desire that had sparked in her belly when she'd gazed up into his eyes. Blast it all, why did they have to be so *green*? Her own were a similar shade – the color went hand in hand with the red hair – but she'd never stared at herself in the mirror and felt as though she were slowly sinking into two pools of shimmering emeralds.

Annoyed by the traitorous direction of her thoughts, Juliet shoved her skirts to the side and pushed herself to her feet. The last thing she needed to be doing was daydreaming over a runner. She was a thief, not a love struck debutante. And she couldn't consider her work finished until she had returned to St. Giles.

Her disappointment at not finding the ring tempered by the jewels weighing down her pockets, she checked her appearance in the antique silver mirror hanging above the dressing table to ensure she still looked as she had when she'd entered the room. With the exception of a slight flush in her cheeks, there was nothing to indicate she'd just spent the past ten minutes crawling around on the floor. Now all she had to do was slip back down the hall and out to the foyer. If anyone stopped or questioned her, she'd merely say she was suffering from a horrible case of the megrims.

All things considered, the night had not been a *complete* loss. There were certainly worse things that could have happened. Like not finding any jewelry at all...or opening the door and coming face to face with Lord Grant Hargrave.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“FANCY MEETING YOU HERE,” Grant drawled. “Looking for something?”

Juliet jumped back from the door as if it had suddenly caught fire, her gaze darting from his hard, glittering gaze to the deadly black pistol he held pointed straight at her heart. “I – I was just looking for the dressing room. I must have gotten–”

“Lost?” He smiled coldly. “Somehow I think you ended up precisely where you wanted to be. Turn around and put your hands on the bedpost. And before you think about running, I should make one thing clear. I *will* shoot you this time.”

She believed him. Gone was the charming gentleman who had flirted shamelessly with her in the ballroom. In his place stood a man carved from granite. A man without kindness or compassion. A man who wouldn’t hesitate to put a bullet in her at the slightest provocation.

This was The Wolf she’d been warned about. If only she’d listened to Bran...

Turning quickly around, she did as he had requested, her fingers wrapping around the sturdy mahogany bedpost until they interlocked.

Her muscles tensed when she heard the creak of a floorboard directly behind her, and she jolted when his hand clamped down on her shoulder.

“What are you doing?” she said warily.

“Checking you for weapons.” He pressed the pistol into the small of her back as he began an impersonal sweep of her body, starting with her neck and working down towards her legs. But his brisk, efficient touches began to slow the closer he got to her waist...and they stopped all together when he reached her hip.

“Lift up your dress.”

Juliet’s skin turned cold and then hot as a flush spread from the tip of her toes to the top of her breasts. Exposed above the lace-trimmed bodice of her gown, her collarbones flushed a dull red. She turned her head and glared back at him over her shoulder, eyes bright with defiance.

“The devil I will,” she snapped.

His head tilting a fraction of an inch to the side, he studied her as a scientist might a particularly fascinating new discovery. “You’re not afraid of me, are you?”

“No.” It wasn’t until she’d spoken the word out loud that she realized it was a lie. Truth be told she *was* afraid of him. But not for the reasons she should have been. The way he could summon a blush to her cheeks with a single glance frightened her. And his ability to make her skin burn with a simple touch? Downright terrifying.

“You should be.” He leaned in so close she could smell the peppermint on his breath and see the throb of his pulse on the side of

his neck. His voice a velvet whisper, he said, "Lift up your dress, Juliet. I am not going to ask again."

"Are you going to rape me?" she asked matter-of-factly.

A sneer drew his mouth to the side. "I'm going to find all the weapons you're hiding before you try to kill me with them. I can assure you, I find nothing remotely desirable about a common criminal. You and your kind disgust me."

Now who was lying? Grant may have hated her every bit as much as she hated him, but there was no denying the attraction between them. Even now it shimmered just beneath the surface of their animosity, a flint that only needed the tiniest of sparks to ignite and burst into flame.

"Easy," he said through gritted teeth when she lifted her leg up and placed the toe of her boot on the edge of the bed. "No sudden movements."

She rolled her eyes. "You've got a pistol. What do you think I'm going to do?"

"I haven't the faintest idea." Cold steel kissed the nape of her neck as he pressed the muzzle to her bare skin. "But I wouldn't put anything past you."

Smart man.

Slowly, carefully, she drew the hem of her dress up to her knee, exposing the small dagger she had strapped to the inside of her calf. Removing it from its leather sheath, she held it reluctantly over her shoulder, the hilt pointing backwards. Grant snatched it away.

"Now the rest," he said.

“That was the only one I—”

“The rest, Juliet.” It wasn’t a request, but a command. One he punctuated with a low growl that sent a shiver coursing down her spine. Bran, devil take him, had been right. The Wolf *was* ruthless. Now that he’d managed to sink his teeth into her, she didn’t see an easy means of escape. But no matter how sharp his claws or how vicious his bite, she would not – she *could* not – give up without a fight. It wasn’t in her nature to surrender. She was not a meek little lamb bound for slaughter. She was a lioness. And soon enough Grant would feel the sharpness of *her* claws.

“Juliet.”

“All right, all right. You needn’t be so testy,” she complained as she hitched her skirts up even higher and pulled out a pistol, then a second dagger.

“Toss them on the bed,” he ordered tersely.

She did as he asked, then waited with her hands loosely draped on her hips for his next command. It was a good thing she was facing away from him, for it meant he couldn’t see the calculating light in her eyes or the determined set of her jaw. She kept her leg poised on the edge of the bed, her bunched skirts revealing the creamy plumpness of her thigh and the slender curve of her calf. She could *feel* his gaze scorching her sensitive flesh and a small, catlike smile curved her lips. Grant may have forced her to get rid of her physical arsenal – with the exception of the small dagger she had tucked between her breasts – but there was one weapon he couldn’t strip her of.

Her feminine wiles.

Juliet may have been a virgin, but she wasn't innocent. Far from it. She knew firsthand the devastating power a man could yield over a woman...and, courtesy of Sam, the power a woman could yield over a man.

She still remembered the night she'd asked her friend why she had willingly chosen a profession where she was controlled by the opposite sex. They'd been sprawled on Sam's red satin sheets, drunk on a bottle of champagne Juliet had lifted from a fancy nabob's house along with a gold pocket watch and a diamond choker.

Lifting a sleek ebony brow, Sam had softly laughed and said, "But darling, you've got it all wrong. *I* control *them*. Not the other way around. All it takes is a smoldering stare...a suggestive touch...and they'll do whatever I want." She sipped her champagne. "The *real* trick is making them believe it's their idea."

"How do you do that?" Juliet had asked, intrigued.

Sam rolled from her belly to her back, dark hair slithering over her arms in a curtain of black silk as she sat up on her elbows. "Figure out what they desire – what they *really* desire – and give it to them."

"Sounds easy enough."

"If it was *that* easy I wouldn't make thirty pounds a client."

Champagne spilled across the coverlet as Juliet's flute tipped in her hand. "Thirty *pounds*? But that's a bloody—"

"Fortune. Yes, I know." One pale shoulder lifted in a careless shrug. "And I don't even have to leave this bed to get it. Well, *sometimes* I leave the bed." Her blue eyes twinkled mischievously. "What can I

say, darling? Passion is a powerful tool. Learn how to wield it and you'll have the world – and any man you choose – at your fingertips.”

Juliet had learned a valuable lesson that day, and it was one she'd never forgotten. If she wanted to control the runner, all she needed to do was find out what he wanted...and give it to him.

“Is that everything?” he asked, nodding at the pistol and dagger she'd thrown onto the bed.

“Of course. What?” She slanted him a sideways glance over her shoulder when she heard his incredulous snort. “Don't believe me? I can't say as I blame you. I suppose I could always disrobe completely. That's the only way you would know for sure,” she purred, channeling the smoky voice she'd heard Sam use with her clients. While the art of seduction did not come as naturally to her as her friend, she'd always been a consummate actress. Not that her desire for Grant required much acting...

“That will not be necessary,” he said quickly. *Too* quickly to her way of thinking.

Ignoring him, she began to trail her hands up her body. His countenance unreadable, Grant remained motionless behind her. Were it not for the heat emanating from his smoldering gaze she might have thought he was unmoved by her little sensual display, but try as he might he couldn't stop his gaze from following the slow, tantalizing trail of her fingertips as they slid over the swell of her breasts.

“What are you doing?” he demanded when she hooked her thumbs inside the capped sleeves of her gown and started to pull down her bodice.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Touching her chin to her shoulder, she peeked up at him beneath long auburn lashes. From the clenched jaw and throbbing muscle high in his right cheek to the carnal longing in the depths of his green eyes, his handsome countenance was a myriad of contradictions. She could sense the battle within him, for it was the same battle she was fighting within herself. Need versus want. Instinct versus desire. Self-preservation versus insatiable lust...

“This isn’t going to work.” He grabbed her wrist abruptly, long fingers closing around the delicate bones in an unyielding grip. For all intents and purposes he might as well have shackled her...to himself.

“What isn’t?” Using the wrist he held as a fulcrum, she pivoted towards him until they were facing one another with nary an inch of space in between. Were it not for the cold hard pistol pressed against her belly, they might have been in the middle of an elegant waltz instead of a tense standoff that was more likely than not going to end with one of them sprawled in a pool of their own blood.

“Your mediocre attempts at seduction.” His gaze hardened as he stared down at her, his mouth curling into a sneer.

Juliet blinked.

Mediocre? He thought she was *mediocre*?

Arrogant bastard.

She’d show him mediocre.

Without giving herself time to think of the consequences, she grabbed a fistful of his shirt, rose up on her toes, and pressed her lips

to his.

CHAPTER NINE

FOR THE SPAN of one thunderous heartbeat Grant managed to resist the sweet allure of Juliet's lips. He told himself that she was a thief. That she would do anything to earn her freedom. That the wicked promise in those tip-tilted eyes was nothing more than a cleverly crafted illusion.

At least, that's what his head told him. His cock was a bit more blunt.

Kiss. Woman. Soft. Mine.

Resist Juliet? Impossible. He could no more resist the temptation of her willing little mouth than he could resist the air he breathed. On a throaty growl he slid his pistol into the waistband of his trousers and dragged her against him, wanting to feel every inch of her delectable body pressed against his.

She leaned into him, sharp nails digging into his chest. His head slanted to the side and he deepened their kiss, ruthlessly demanding everything she had to give. Without hesitation she parted her lips and welcomed his tongue between her teeth on a soft, breathy mewl of desire that made him want to throw back his head and roar.

Grant was a man who prided himself on his self-control, but there

was no control to be found in their kiss. There was only a wild, pulsating need to plunder. To devour. To leap recklessly into the flames and let himself burn.

So he did.

His hands swept up her spine and tangled in her hair, sending pins flying in every direction. The tidy coiffure unraveled, spilling fiery tendrils over her shoulders that stood out in sharp contrast against her ivory skin. The auburn tresses smelled faintly of violets, the delicately feminine scent as unexpected as it was arousing. He drew back to stare down at her, wanting to drink in every stunning inch of her flawless countenance. In the muted candlelight her entire face seemed to glow, from her flushed cheeks to her glistening lips, already swollen from the demanding pressure of his mouth.

She gazed up him, green eyes dark and troubled. A tiny line of wary bewilderment marred her smooth brow. He knew his own forehead carried the same mark. What had begun as a calculated act of seduction had quickly turned into something more powerful than either one of them could have ever anticipated.

There was no sense to their sizzling chemistry. No rhyme. No reason.

A thief and a runner?

Impossible.

And yet...

Having shared his bed with more than one courtesan, Grant *knew* when a woman was playing a part. He knew that was precisely what Juliet had intended to do. But he also knew, with every fiber of his

being, that she had failed miserably.

If her silence was any indication, she knew it as well. When this was over – when this moment of heat and blinding passion had passed – they would still be as they had been. The hunter and the hunted. But he didn't want it to end. Not yet. And neither did she.

This time their kiss held a hint of desperation. He devoured the honeyed nectar of her mouth like a man starved. His cock rose between them to press against her belly, branding her flesh through the thin layers of her dress with its hard, hot length.

She gasped when he rocked his pelvis against her sensitive groin.

He groaned when she sank her teeth into his bottom lip.

They both trembled, their bodies throbbing with unspoken need as they both took whatever the other had to give. His craving for her was unparalleled to anything he had ever felt before. It seized him mind, body, and soul, numbing his brain to any type of rational thought as her fingers began an exploratory path down the muscled plane of his abdomen.

Without warning her hands abruptly reversed direction and streaked behind his back. On a savage oath he tried to stop her, but passion had dulled his reflexes. Quick as a cat she grabbed his pistol and leapt out of reach, balancing nimbly on the balls of her feet as she raised the gun and pointed it straight at the middle of his chest.

Furious with her, more furious with himself, he slowly lifted his arms in the air, palms facing towards her. "You're making a mistake," he growled, dark eyes narrowing to slits of glinting emerald as his gaze raked across her flushed countenance. She was breathing so

heavily that her breasts were temptingly close to spilling out of her flimsy bodice, but her hands were steady and her stare unflinching when she met his murderous stare with her own triumphant one.

“I don’t think so, runner.” She gave a jaunty toss of her head. “You really didn’t think that little act was going to end any other way, did you?”

Bloody hell. Even though she held his own weapon against him, he still wanted her. How could he not? Her flame-colored hair was in a wild tangle around her ivory shoulders, her mouth plump and swollen from his demanding kisses. He’d never seen a more tempting creature in all his life and his body ached to finish what they’d started. To toss her on the bed and strip away her gown. To ravish every inch of her curvy little body until she begged him to take her.

He swallowed with difficulty and shifted his weight, hoping she wouldn’t glance down and see the bulging erection pressing against his trousers.

“We both know damn well that wasn’t an act,” he said tersely.

She hesitated a second too long. “Of course it was. Now turn around and face the wall. Keep your arms above your head.”

“You’re making an enormous—”

“I believe I said *now*.” The sharp click of the hammer being drawn back startled him into action. Whore’s breath, she wouldn’t actually *shoot* him, would she?

Yes, he decided as he took note of the determined gleam in her eye. She bloody well would.

His jaw clenched, teeth grinding together with so much force he felt

a distinct *pop* in the back of his mouth. What he wouldn't give to get his hands around her pretty little neck. That would wipe the arrogant smirk off those swollen lips. But as long as she held the gun she held the power, and he had no choice but to turn and walk to the wall. The paper-hangings smelled strongly of gardenia, Lady Dashwood's fragrance of choice and the direct opposite of Juliet's delicate scent.

"What now?" he growled after he'd slapped his hands up on the wall.

"Now I go on my merry way and you leave me the hell alone." He heard the bed creak as she leaned across it to presumably gather her weapons, followed by the soft padding of her footsteps on the carpet as she backed slowly towards the door. "For what it's worth, I've never hurt anyone that did not deserve it, and I've never taken from anyone who could not afford it."

"Is that supposed to make you a good person?" he scoffed.

"No," she acknowledged. "But it doesn't make me a bad one."

"You're a thief, Juliet. A criminal." And he'd still kissed her senseless. *So what*, he wondered silently, *does that make me?*

He, Grant Hargrave, a man who lived and died by his moral code, had broken the rules. Rules he'd abided by his entire career, first as a soldier and then as a runner. Rules that governed his entire life, from the second he woke up in the morning to the moment he closed his eyes at night. But Juliet, with her pouty lips and velvety voice and tight little body, had been too much of a temptation to resist. So he'd broken the rules. Hell, he'd *shattered* the damn rules.

And now he was paying the consequences.

"You're right," she said. "I *am* a thief. A bloody good one, too. I make no apologies for who I am or what I've done." Light spilled into the room when she opened the door.

"This is not over," he vowed darkly.

"Are you going to keep chasing me, runner?" She almost sounded *amused*.

"To the ends of the earth."

Juliet was so quiet that for a moment he thought she'd fled, but when he looked back over his shoulder he found her poised in the doorway, her vivid green eyes as wild and fierce as he'd ever seen them.

"You won't catch me. Not again."

Her defiance only added to her untamed beauty. She reminded him of a tigress he'd seen the summer before he went off to war. The large feline had been captured in India and brought back to London to enthrall the masses. Trapped in a cage too small for her massive size, she had sat quietly while people shouted and clapped. Until her captor got too close...and she took his hand.

For all her stunning beauty, Juliet was every bit as dangerous as that tigress had been. Something he would do well to remember the next time he was tempted to kiss her instead of capture her.

"Best sleep with one eye open, little tigress."

"Oh?" She gave a coy tilt of her head. "And why is that?"

"Because the question is not *if* I'll find you." His ominous smile was a dark promise of things yet to come. "The question is when."

CHAPTER TEN

FOR THE SECOND TIME Juliet ran away from Grant as if the hounds of hell were nipping at her heels. Or to be more accurate, one hound. One very big, very menacing, very *hungry* hound.

When he had kissed her back she'd feared he was going to devour her whole...but what had frightened her even more, what had scared her absolutely witless, was how much she'd loved it.

She'd loved the weight of his mouth on hers and the bold way he'd swept his tongue between her teeth. She'd loved the taste of him; a touch of peppermint with just a hint of coffee grounds. She'd loved the possessive way he had run his hands through her hair. And she'd especially loved the throaty growl he'd made when she bit his bottom lip.

Shoving between two older women wearing feather plumed hats, she ran down the hall as fast as her gown would allow. Knowing her lead was only slight at best and nonexistent at worst, she skidded into the foyer and dashed out the front door, taking the wide marble steps two at a time.

The late evening drizzle had turned into a downpour and rain

lashed at her face in a cold, icy spray as she sprinted down the walkway and leaped over a small wrought iron fence. Her ankle turned when she landed and she fell hard on her hands and knees in a patch of wet grass, the pistol she'd stolen from Grant flying out of her hand in a graceful arc before landing with a loud *ker-plunk* in a stone fountain topped by a smirking cherub.

"Bloody goddamn dress!" she cursed, yanking at her skirts in frustration. This was exactly why she preferred breeches! So when she stole jewelry and was caught by a runner and had to flee for her life she didn't land face first in a pile of sod.

Clenching her teeth against the sharp pain radiating from her ankle, she half ran, half staggered towards the long row of carriages lining the street just as Grant's booming voice tore through the night.

"JULIET! I KNOW YOU'RE OUT THERE. TURN YOURSELF IN!"

Aye, good luck with that, she thought with a sneer. After all the trouble she'd gone through to get herself free, did he honestly believe she was just going to walk up to him with her head bowed and her arms held out? She'd rather die than spend the rest of her life locked in a cell.

Blinking rain out of her eyes, she managed to hobble behind a glossy black brougham pulled by two matching grays. Flattening herself against one of the back wheels, she dared a quick glance around the side.

Grant stood silhouetted in the entryway, his towering frame casting an insidious shadow that reached all the way to the bottom of the marble stairs. His head swiveled left and right as he looked for her.

She held her breath, silently willing him to go back inside. With her twisted ankle her chances of outrunning him were slim to none. She was trapped...just like one of the rats she and Eddy used to catch in the bottom of old grain bins.

They would lure the rodents with bits of moldy cheese and sell them to the baker in Highmarket Square. Little did the fancy ladies in their plumed hats know they were getting a bit more than they bargained for in their mincemeat pies.

Taking a deep breath, she turned back around and considered her options. She may not have been able to run, but she could still defend herself. *Would* defend herself if it came down to it. She didn't want to shoot Grant. Not because of their kiss or any attraction she may or may not have felt towards him. Of course not. She didn't want to shoot him for the same reason she hadn't wanted to shoot him in the bookstore. One runner after her was bad enough, but if she took the life of one of their own she knew she'd have all of Bow Street breathing down her neck.

She'd also been telling the truth in Lady Dashwood's bedroom. She did not hurt those who did not deserve it, and even though Grant was a ruddy pain in her arse, he was only doing his job. As he'd so kindly pointed out, *she* was the criminal. It was his job to catch her and turn her over to the magistrate for sentencing.

So why the devil had he kissed her?

Later, she told herself as heat flared in her belly. *You can think about that later. Right now you need to focus on getting out of here alive.*

She snuck another peek around the carriage and felt a quiver of

alarm race down her spine when she saw him walking slowly down the steps. Whipping back around before he saw her, she let her head fall back with a dull *thud*, the quiet sound causing on the gray's to swish its tail in annoyance.

Shite.

Shite. Shite.

Shite.

What the devil was she going to do? Short of crawling under the carriage, there was nowhere else for her to go and it would only be a matter of time before he figured out where she was hiding. She shuddered to think of what he would do when he caught her. Bind her arms behind her back and drag her straight to Bow Street, most likely. Would he kiss her again?

Focus, Jules!

Right. She needed to *stop* thinking about kissing and *start* thinking about a way out of this mess. Shaking her wet hair out of her eyes, she bit down hard on the inside of her cheek as she mulled over her limited possibilities.

She supposed she could always stab him. A little knife wound never hurt anyone. But that would require her to get close to him and she feared if she did he would be able to easily overpower her, big lummoX that he was. Maybe she could steal a carriage...but all he had to do was jump on a horse and he'd chase her down in a matter of minutes. Blast and *damn*. Why couldn't he save them both the trouble and just give up? He was certainly taking his time descending the stairs. She glanced around the side of the carriage again, and her eyes

narrowed when she saw a willowy blonde standing in the doorway.

She was saying something to Grant. From this distance Juliet couldn't hear the words being exchanged, but whatever the blonde said caused his mouth to thin. He shook his head sharply and then pointed at the door, a clear indication he wanted the woman to return inside, but she refused. After a standoff that lasted for the better part of five minutes and was punctuated by rapid arm movements from both parties, Grant eventually turned around and stomped back up the steps.

Before he stepped through the doorway he paused and cast one last, searching glance over his shoulder. For an instant it seemed as though he was staring straight at her...but then with another shake of his head he stepped over the threshold and the door swung closed behind him.

"Phew," Juliet gasped, her knees trembling with relief as she sagged back against the carriage. That had been close.

Too close.

All that currently separated her from a cold cell in Newgate was a pinch of luck, a dash of ingenuity, and a passionate kiss. She felt like a cat that just been saved by one of its nine lives. A very cold, very hungry, very *wet* cat.

The rain had plastered her hair to her head and soaked her dress all the way through to the skin. It continued to fall in great slicing sheets, mercilessly pummeling the rooftops of the carriages. She needed to get back to St Giles. Back to her bed and a hot meal and a glass – better make it an entire jug – of wine. But when she tried to put weight on

her left leg it nearly buckled.

Right.

Her ankle.

Grimacing, she managed to crouch down and untie the laces on her boot. But that was as far as she could go. Her ankle had already swollen to nearly twice its size and was quickly turning a bluish black color. Thumping her fist against the cold ground in silent frustration – what *else* could go wrong tonight?! – she grabbed onto a spoke in the wheel and used it to haul herself back up to her feet.

Grant may have gone inside, but there was no telling when he would return. She thought of his parting words inside the bedroom, and the shiver that coursed through her had nothing to do with the cold.

The question is not if I'll find you. The question is when.

Before their kiss it hadn't been personal for him. Now it was, and she feared he hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said he would chase her to the ends of the earth. He was, after all, The Wolf. Chasing down prey was what he did best. And she'd just placed herself at the top of his hunting list. Twisted ankle or no twisted ankle, she needed to make herself scarce.

You've deal with worse pain than this, she told herself. Like the time she had fallen off a ladder trying to reach the third floor bedroom of a wealthy baroness and snapped her arm right in half. Now *that* had hurt. Yeti had taken one look at her white face and broken arm cradled awkwardly against her chest and immediately sent for a doctor. Or at least what passed for a doctor in St Giles. He had set her

arm - she still shuddered whenever she thought of it - and wrapped it in a sling where it had remained for the better part of two months.

She'd been twelve.

When she was fifteen she fell through some rotten floorboards and ended up with a large iron nail sticking out of her hand. Eight years later and she still had the scar.

And then there was the time she'd been pinned down to her bed by someone she thought she could trust. That had hurt far worse than any physical ailment.

But she didn't think about that. Or him.

Not anymore.

Needless to say, she'd taken her fair share of lumps over the years. Not exactly unexpected, given where she had grown up.

Juliet was not an English rose who had been lovingly cultivated until she bloomed and blossomed into a beautiful, delicate hothouse flower. She was a weed. A weed that had managed to not only grow between the cracks in the cobblestones, but to thrive. She was tough, and she was hard, and no matter how many times she was trampled or kicked, she always came back, because to really kill a weed you had to yank up the roots...and her roots were as deep and as strong as her unyielding spirit.

Although a fat lot of good her roots did her when she was stuck on the wrong side of London with no means of getting back home except a slow, torturous hobble through the rain.

Well, she thought, inwardly bracing herself, *best get hobbling*. But she'd no sooner taken three painful steps than a deep, familiar voice

emanating from the shadows had her jumping straight up in the air like a scalded cat.

"I take it the robbery went well?" Bran drawled as he stepped out from behind a carriage.

"Whore in a handbasket!" she cried when she landed hard on her left foot. Arms wind milling, she hopped up to Bran and punched the middle of his chest with no small amount of force. "You bloody bastard! You nearly scared the shite out of me!"

"Do ye kiss your mum with that mouth?" Blue eyes bright with amusement, he caught her arm when she tried to take another swing at him. "Easy there, Jules. One is allowed, but I can't 'ave a woman beatin' up on me. I've a reputation to uphold."

"I'll give you something to hold," she hissed.

"What's crawled up your skirts?" he demanded, ducking easily to the side when she took a half-hearted swipe at his head with one of her knives. Flickering gas light illuminated his lean countenance, revealing the dark slashing brows and the crooked nose and the hard jawline covered in stubby brown whiskers that she knew so well.

There was no one she trusted more than Bran. No one closer to her heart than Bran. No one who knew her more than Bran. He was her friend. Her brother. Her confidant. Which was why, when her lower lip trembled and tears threatened, she allowed him to pull her into his arms and hug her tight against his warm chest.

"There now," he said, a flicker of surprise drawing his dark brows together. "What's gotten me Jules in such a state?"

"I - I couldn't find the r-ring," she said between watery snuffles.

"Typical woman." His teeth flashed white in the soft glow of the light as he grinned down at her. "Crying over a piece of jewelry. It'll be all right, lamb. Chin up. No piece of flash is worth yer tears. No matter how pretty it is. Or how much blunt we could've gotten for it," he muttered under his breath.

"I'm not upset just because of the bloody ring." Although it *did* sting that after all her time and effort she'd come up empty-handed. "I think I wrenched my ankle. Or maybe I've broken it. I don't know."

"Your ankle? Let me see." Concerned, Bran knelt down. She held still as he gently ran his hands down the outside of her boot to check for swelling, but when he tried to pull it off she yelped and jumped back.

"Don't do that! It *hurts*."

He sat back on his heels. "It could be broken," he said grimly. "It's hard to tell. Either way, we need to get ye home and get that boot off before the swellin' gets any worse. Can ye walk?"

Dashing at the tears on her cheeks, Juliet didn't bother to contain her snort. "If I could do that do you think I'd still be standing here?"

"Now that ye mention it," he said, rubbing his jaw as she stood up. "Why *are* ye standing out here? And 'ow the devil did ye hurt your ankle in the first place?"

"I was running and I...tripped," she said evasively.

"Running from?" he prompted.

She looked away, not wanting to see his smug *I-told-you-so* expression. "I ran into a bit of trouble in the ballroom."

Literally.

"What sort o' trouble?"

"The Wolf, all right?" she snapped, small hands curling into fists as her gaze swerved back to Bran. She glared fiercely, daring him to mock her. "I ran into The Wolf."

Or rather he ran into me.

"Grant Hargrave is 'ere?" Bran's head snapped towards the manor.

"Don't worry," she sighed. "He went back inside."

"That don't mean 'e will stay there. Come on." He grabbed her arm and started to pull her along behind him, but stopped short and released an ear-blistering curse when she cried out in pain. "Yer ankle. I forgot." His brow furrowed. "I'll just carry ye, then."

"Carry me?" Her eyes widened. "The devil you - Bran!" she squealed when he picked her up off the ground as if she weighed no more than a sack of potatoes and slung her over his shoulder. She pounded her fists against his back. "Put me down, you smelly ox!"

Ignoring her, he looked left and then right to make sure the way was clear before walking quickly across the street. The glow of the gas lights faded away as they left Berkley Square behind. But even as the decadence and opulence of the West End was slowly replaced by the rot and decay of the East, Juliet had a feeling this wasn't going to be the last time she saw Grant Hargrave. Their paths would cross again. She was certain of it. She just didn't know where...or when.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

One Week Later

Commercial Docks, London

"BOLLOCKS, IT'S COLD." Colin Ferguson, a sturdily built runner with dark blond hair and kind hazel eyes, rubbed his hands briskly together before stuffing them into the pockets of his greatcoat. "I thought it was supposed to be spring?"

"Welcome to spring in London," Grant said dryly.

Ronan Hawke, a runner of few words, grunted in agreement. Big as a bull and twice as mean, he was Bow Street's muscle. One look at his trunk-sized neck (not to mention his massive chest), and a criminal more often than not turned themselves over with hardly a squeak. Grant was hoping that would be the case tonight.

They'd been called down to the wharf to investigate a series of robberies. Someone was stealing goods off the merchant ships as they came into port. Over the past two weeks they had managed to steal five barrels of tobacco, two crates of tea, and – oddly enough – a trunk filled with silk handkerchiefs.

A heavy fog hung over the docks, making it nearly impossible to see more than four or five planks ahead. Holding up a lantern encased in

glass, Grant led the way down a long pier while Colin and Hawke flanked out behind him, keeping a wary eye open for anyone lurking in the shadows. The wharf was a dangerous place, filled with all manner of thieves and pickpockets who wouldn't bat an eye at stabbing a bloke for the coins he carried in his pocket.

"Do you know what we're looking for?" Colin asked as they approached a small wooden dinghy moored at the end of the pier.

"Not what." Carefully setting the lantern down in the middle of the dock, Grant drew back his foot and kicked the side of the dingy with so much force the boat nearly capsized. "Who," he said with satisfaction when a shout sounded from beneath a pile of rags and a man popped up.

"Bloody 'ell!" he yelled, brandishing a short sword so encrusted with rust that it was more brown than silver in the soft glow of the lamplight. "Who the devil do ye think ye - oh." As his watery gaze focused on Grant, he lowered his sword and turned his head to spit into the water. "It's you."

"It's me." Grant held out his arm. With obvious reluctance the man – better known as Captain Jim, an old sailor turned drunk who'd lived in his beaten up boat for as long as anyone could remember – allowed himself to be pulled up onto the pier.

"What do ye want this time?" he demanded, squinting at Grant out of bloodshot gray eyes. A thick black beard peppered with white covered the lower half of his face. The upper half was dominated by scraggly eyebrows that wiggled like pieces of bait every time he spoke. "I've been mindin' me own business, I 'ave. Keepin' to meself.

Stayin' out of trouble."

"Staying drunk is more like it," Colin said, his nose wrinkling as he caught a whiff of the sailor's potent cologne, *eau du* rotten fish, gin, and seawater.

"Oy! Never let it be said I can't hold me liquor." With a drunken leer Captain Jim tried to take a step forward, lost his balance, and would have pitched over the side of the pier if Hawke hadn't grabbed ahold of his shirtfront.

"Easy, Captain." Reaching inside his coat, Grant drew out a small leather pouch and dangled it in front of the old sailor. "All we're after is a few minutes of your time. Nothing more. Have you heard about the supplies that have gone missing off the merchant ships?"

Jim dragged his fingers through his beard. "Maybe I 'ave and maybe I 'aven't. What's it to ye?"

Colin, never patient under the best of circumstances, released a curse. "We don't have time for this. Toss him back in his bloody raft and be done with it. We'll find the culprit on our own."

"The Captain knows more about these docks than anyone," Grant said with an easy smile. "Don't you, my fine man?"

"Aye." Jim glared at Colin before looking up at the pouch Grant was dangling above his head like a carrot in front of a horse. "I know 'em better than anybody. Nothing happens 'ere that gets past Captain Jim. Ye can bet my sweet Mary on it."

"Who's Mary?" Colin asked.

"His boat," Grant replied. Loosening the drawstring on the pouch, he turned it over and shook out a handful of coins into Jim's waiting

palm. "Five shillings if you can tell me what you know about the merchant ships."

"A sailor never turns on 'is mates! We've a code of honor that I'm obliged to-

"Five shillings and a bottle of gin."

Jim smacked his lips together. "Done."

"Code of honor my arse," Colin muttered under his breath.

Hawk nodded in silent agreement.

"Now," Grant said, ignoring them both. "Who is it? Who's been stealing off the boats?"

"What about the gin?" Jim said suspiciously.

"It's here." He patted his coat. "You get it *after* you tell me what I need to know."

"Ye always were a crafty bastard. All right." He slapped a hand to the back of his neck. Dug short, brittle nails into skin that looked like it hadn't seen a good scrubbing since Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. "It's a young lad. About the same age as that one." He jabbed a bony finger at Colin. "Has a white scar underneath his eye. Real mean sort. The kind that will gut a fish and toss it back in the water jest to see it try to swim."

"Does this lad have a name?" Grant asked.

"Calls 'imself Mallack. E's put together a gang of four, maybe five. Sailors, mostly. Or at least they used to be. They hit the ships the same night they come in. Half past midnight, sometimes a little later. They wait until the crew heads to The Lusty Mermaid."

A tavern made out of the hull of an old pirate ship run aground by

the British Fleet, The Lusty Mermaid was a favorite establishment of sailors, cutthroats, and thieves. Occasionally Owen ordered a raid on the tiny tavern but it was a dangerous business with little reward as the criminals they *really* wanted always had a way of slipping out of the back, leaving them with the drunks and the fools.

The last time Grant had frequented the Mermaid he'd been lucky to leave with his life after a stray bullet clipped the edge of his ear. He still remembered the burning heat of it, as well as the moment of stunned disbelief that followed when he realized how close he had come to death.

It shook a man, coming face to face with his own mortality. It made him think about what was really important. What really mattered. For Grant, that was being a runner...and a good son. But how much longer could he continue to be both? Sooner or later, one would have to give way to the other. His parents wanted him to accept his birthright and become the lord he had been born to be. To find a gentle lady and raise a family and spend his summers in a quiet country estate far away from Bow Street. But his heart – his very *soul* – knew he was right where he belonged.

Did he ever look at his brother's and their wives and children and feel a twinge of envy? Of course. He would be foolish not to. But he knew, deep down, that sort of life wasn't for him. Not as long as he was a runner. For what sort of gently bred woman would want her husband to hold such a dangerous position? One that not only put his life at risk, but potentially hers as well.

In a perfect world he supposed he could have both. The job *and* the

woman. But all he had to do was take one look at the poor old drunk standing in front of him to know that nothing about the world was perfect.

"Don't know where they're keepin' everything," Jim continued. "One o' the warehouses, most like." He looked yearningly at Grant's coat. "Can I 'ave me gin now? I've a mighty thirst."

Grant pulled a plain glass bottle out of his pocket and gave it to the old sailor who immediately popped the cork and took a long, gulping swallow.

"Ah," Jim said, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. "Nothin' better than a fine woman and a good bottle o' gin."

"I'll take your word on the latter," Grant said dryly. "When's the next merchant ship scheduled to come in?"

"End o' the week."

"Thank you, Captain. You've done us a great service." He shook Jim's hand and for an instant so quick that if he'd blinked he would have missed it, he saw a glimpse of the man Jim had been before drink and dashed dreams had taken their toll. Then the proud light in the old sailor's watery eyes dimmed, his shoulders slumped, and he shuffled back to his dingy with his bottle of gin cradled lovingly in his arms.

"Well that was certainly interesting," Colin remarked as they made their way back down the pier. "Do you think he was telling the truth?"

"I don't think he would have any reason to lie." Grant tipped down the brim of his hat as a light misting rain began to fall. "We'll come back in four days. See if we can't catch these bastards red-handed."

"Sounds like a plan to me."

"Hawke?"

"Aye," the burly Runner grunted.

When they reached the end of the wharf Grant stopped short as a wayward thought tickled the back of his mind. "You two go on," he said, nodding in the direction of Bow Street. "I've some business yet."

"Business?" Colin lifted a brow. "This late at night? What are you – ah," he said, a knowing smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Got yourself a ladybird, have you? You old dog." He punched Grant lightly on the shoulder. "Spencer said you had a wench in every part of town, but I didn't believe him."

Grant's eyes narrowed. While he *did* enjoy a good tup – what man didn't? – the extent of his sexual exploits had been greatly exaggerated. And he knew precisely who had been doing the exaggerating.

"Spencer is a bloody idiot. If you see the captain, tell him I'll be in first thing tomorrow morning."

Colin's grin widened. "Have a good time, mate."

"Sod off."

GRANT HEARD – and smelled – The Lusty Mermaid before he saw it. Supported on either side by decaying masts held together with black tar, the old pirate ship looked as though one stiff breeze would send it rolling back into the Thames.

Dim light and raucous laughter spilled from the port holes, as did the smell of unwashed bodies and strong ale. It wasn't a place for the

faint of heart, and when a gunshot rang out and a bullet came flying through the rotten belly of the hull, leaving a splintered hole in its wake, Grant just stepped to the side and kept on going.

As he neared the front door it swung open and a drunkard, stripped of all his clothes save a soiled pair of drawers, sailed out with the help of a bald-headed bruiser who could have easily passed for Hawke's brother. One look at Grant and the bruiser stopped in his tracks, fleshy lip curling in a sneer. "Nuffin' here for the likes of ye, runner," he growled. "We ain't after no trouble."

"That's good, because I'm not after causing any. I'm looking for someone." He angled his head to the side, trying to look into the tavern. "A woman."

With every day that had passed since the Dashwood Ball, his desire to find Juliet had increased tenfold. He knew the odds of her being in a place like this were slim to none, but he was willing to bet someone inside knew who she was and where she lived. A female thief, particularly one who looked like her, couldn't go unnoticed.

"Bar wenches are two shillings an hour, three if ye like it rough."

"A tempting offer, but I'm after a different sort of woman." Knowing how the game was played, he pulled out another leather pouch nearly identical to the one he'd emptied for Captain Jim and tossed it at the bruiser. "Long hair red as a ruby. Large green eyes, a little tilted in the corners. Full mouth." *That tastes like honey.* "Small, curvy frame." He could feel his cock begin to swell and harden as he brought up a picture of Juliet in his mind. Her knowing little smirk. The way her breasts pushed against her bodice when she tilted her chin up at him.

The hint of wildness in her gaze, like a filly that hadn't yet felt the weight of a bit between its teeth. He adjusted his stance, and hoped the bruiser wouldn't look down. "Have you seen anyone like that?"

"Aye, runner. In me dreams." The bruiser let out a hard, barking cough as he slipped the pouch into his pocket. "We're lucky if the wenches who come in 'ere have all their bleedin' teef. Wherever your red-haired unicorn is, she ain't here."

"Mind if I take a look for myself?"

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "It's your funeral, runner."

It wasn't exactly a warm welcome, but then Grant hadn't been expecting one. Tipping his hat, he walked through the door and into pure bedlam.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JULIET COULD *feel* the tiny hairs on the nape of her neck stand straight up even before a hush fell over the boisterous crowd and every head swiveled towards the door. She didn't need to turn around in her chair to know that whoever had just entered The Lusty Mermaid, they were not welcome. Which meant it was either a runner, a peeler, or Old Danny McDougall back from the dead.

"Please tell me it's McDougall," she whispered, slanting a sideways glance at Bran. They were sharing a small, shadowy table in the back of the tavern next to the bar. It was only the third time Juliet had been in The Lusty Mermaid and it was every bit as awful as she remembered. The smell alone was enough to make a pig retch. But she'd been cooped up for a better part of a week while her ankle healed, and when Bran told her he was going out she'd immediately demanded that he take her with him.

She'd just neglected to ask where he was going.

So far tonight she'd seen a drunk piss himself, a sailor shoot his friend in the arm, and half a dozen brawls. In other words, it was just another normal night at the Mermaid. Until everyone fell silent and reached for the closest weapon.

"I'm afraid not," Bran said out of the corner of his mouth as he tipped back his mug of ale.

"A peeler?" she said hopefully. London's new metropolitan police force, named for their founder Sir Robert Peel, may have looked smart in their navy blue uniforms and top hats, but the lot of them were as dull as an old rusty nail.

"Seems like The Wolf is out hunting. Don't move a bleedin' muscle," Bran warned, grabbing her wrist and pinning it to the table when she instinctively started to push back her chair. "You don't want to draw attention to yourself."

"Is he looking over here?" she hissed, her nails digging into the scarred wood as she struggled not to glance back over her shoulder.

What the *devil* was Grant Hargrave doing at The Lusty Mermaid? Runners never came this far east. It was too dangerous, even for them. Yet here he was. Had he come for her? Had he known somehow, someway, that she would be here tonight? *Impossible*, she scoffed.

"What is he doing? Is he coming this way? Is he—"

"Shut yer trap," Bran gritted out between his teeth.

The floorboards creaked beneath Grant's boots as he walked further into the tavern. The tension radiating around the room could have been sliced with a knife, and when he walked up to the bar everyone drew a collective breath, including Juliet.

"A round of pints for everyone," he shouted, and the Mermaid erupted in cheers.

As the pressure eased and the music and shouting resumed, Juliet dared to take a quick peek at the bar. She saw Grant leaning casually

against it, looking as comfortable in the tavern as he had in the ballroom. He was wearing a heavy black coat that dropped past his knees and tall leather boots splattered with mud. As she watched he drew off his hat and raked a hand through his hair, combing the thick inky tresses back to reveal a sharp profile and flashing grin. The grin was directed at a serving wench who giggled and batted her lashes when he leaned over the bar and whispered something in her ear.

"What is he *doing* here?" She wrenched her gaze away to glare at Bran.

"How the bollocks should I know? I didn't send him a bloody invitation!"

No, but someone clearly had. Which meant she needed to find the nearest exit.

Fast.

"I need you to watch my back," she said tersely.

Bran's eyes narrowed. "Why do I suddenly 'ave the impression yer about to do something stupid?"

"I'm not doing anything except for getting the hell out of here." She adjusted her floppy brown hat, making sure her hair was still tucked up inside before dragging the brim down to conceal as much of her face as possible. Dressed as she was in an oversized jacket and bulky trousers she hoped Grant wouldn't recognize her, but she wasn't going to take any chances.

"Is he looking this way?"

"No, but—"

She didn't wait for Bran to finish. The legs of her chair scraped

against the floor as she stood up, but the small sound was swallowed up by all of the deafening noise. Keeping her head low, she skirted around the edge of the table and walked as quickly as she could towards the back door.

She was so intent on getting out of the tavern that she didn't see the barmaid carrying a tray of pints until it was too late. They collided as if in slow motion. The barmaid's arms jerked in surprise and the pints went sailing into the air, tumbling end over end until they crashed to the ground in a splintering of glass and frothy ale.

"Oy!" yelled a red-faced sailor, jabbing a finger at Juliet from across the room. "One of those were mine, ye clumsy bastard!"

Every head turned, including Grant's. For a moment there was only confusion in the depths of his green eyes, and then recognition dawned.

Oh shite, Juliet thought silently when his jaw clenched and he began to fight his way through the crowd, tossing full grown men out of his way as if they weighed nothing.

"Run, Jules!" Bran shouted, his chair toppling as he sprang to his feet and drew out his pistol. His first shot went into the ceiling and sent bits of wood and plaster raining down on her head as she hurdled over a table. Someone else fired their gun, hitting one of the portholes. Within a matter of seconds the entire tavern erupted in violence as angry shouts filled the air and fists began flying left and right.

A hairy arm came sailing in front of her face. She dropped to her knees, head falling back as the arm passed over her nose with a hair's

breadth to spare and plowed into a man's ribcage with a sickening *crunch*.

As she scrambled to her feet she saw a barmaid being dragged up the stairs by two laughing sailors. For an instant their gazes met, and the helpless misery in the maid's tear drenched eyes struck Juliet like a knife to the heart. But for a lucky twist of fate – and good timing on Bran's part – that could have been *her* being dragged up the stairs.

She looked at the door, less than two feet away.

She looked up at the stairs.

Back at the door.

"Oh bugger it," she cursed under her breath as she changed direction and began to thread her way through the brawling crowd.

An elbow glanced off the side of her head. A heavy boot stomped on her foot. Biting back a hiss of pain, she put all her weight behind a punch that sent a drunkard sprawling back on his arse. Leaping over him, she reached the stairs and took the creaky wooden steps two at a time. Halfway up she stopped short, her gaze sweeping over the railing as if drawn by a magnetic force. A magnetic force with an iron jaw, firm lips, piercing eyes, and the thickest, silkiest hair she'd ever run her fingers through.

She saw Grant by the bar fighting off two men armed with broken bottles. He feinted to the side when one of them tried to stab him in the face, moving with such effortless speed and grace it looked as if his attackers were standing still. Two quick uppercuts to the jaw, a fist to the belly, and they both went down like a pile of rocks. Flexing his fingers, Grant turned around suddenly, his eyes traveling up the stairs

to where she stood poised like a deer in the bow line of a hunter.

Then their gazes met and suddenly all of the noise, all of the mayhem and madness, simply...faded away.

For the span of one thunderous heartbeat she saw him not as a runner or an adversary, but as a man. A strong, virile man who she desired beyond all reasoning. Then he blinked, and the spell was broken, and they were enemies once again.

"JULIET!" His furious shout rose above the clamor and commotion. "STOP RIGHT THERE."

"Feck you," she called out, borrowing one of Bran's favorite slurs. Touching her fingers to her lips she blew him a kiss. Not waiting to see his response, she scrambled up the rest of the stairs and yanked open the first door she came to.

The small room was dimly lit with a single flickering candle, but there was enough light for her to see one sailor holding the struggling barmaid pinned to an old mattress while the other shoved up her skirts and positioned himself between her flailing legs.

"Hold 'er still," the man at the foot of the bed grunted. Short and heavysset with a bushy black beard, he licked his lips in anticipation as he unbuttoned his trousers and yanked them down to his knees.

"The wench is slippery as a damn eel!" The sailor lifted his hand to strike her, but the loud *click* of Juliet's flintlock pistol as she cocked back the hammer gave him pause.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Aiming the pistol at Bushy Beard, she sauntered into the room and arched a brow. "Why don't you blokes find something else to twist your fancy? I don't think the lady's

interested in those tiny little knobs between your legs."

"Who the 'ell are you?" Bushy Beard demanded, his face flushing a dull, mottled red as he grabbed his trousers and yanked them back up to his waist. "This ain't none of yer concern!"

"He ain't gonna shoot us," the other sailor said confidently. "Look at 'em. He's a green lad who ain't seen 'is first whisker yet." He grinned, revealing a blackened row of rotten teeth. "Don't worry, boy. This one's got plenty of fight in 'er. Ye can have yer turn when we're done."

Juliet's head tilted. "I am going to count to three, and then I am going to start shooting. One..."

"Go on," the sailor urged Bushy Beard. "He ain't gonna do nuffin'."

"Two." Squinting her right eye, she moved the barrel a few inches to the left and pulled the trigger.

"Ahh!" Bushy Beard yelled as acrid black smoke filled the air. Clutching his shoulder, he fell back against the wall. Dark red blood spurted between his fingers. "What the 'ell happened to three?"

"Sorry," Juliet said sweetly. "I guess I forgot."

"No wench is worth this shite." His face contorted into a grimace of pain, Bushy Beard gave her a wide berth as he stumbled out the door. After a moment's hesitation his companion followed.

"This isn't over," he hissed, his beady black eyes flashing with contempt as he backed slowly out into the hall. "Ye are gonna pay for that, lad. Ye are gonna pay dearly."

It wasn't the first threat Juliet had received, nor would it be the last. Waiting until their footsteps faded away, she rushed to the bed and helped the barmaid sit up.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I - I think so." Appearing pale but otherwise unharmed, the barmaid looked gratefully up at Juliet. She was a tiny slip of a thing with delicate features, wispy blonde hair, and luminous violet eyes damp with tears. By Juliet's estimation the poor girl couldn't have been older than sixteen, seventeen at the most.

"Thank ye," she whispered, managing a watery smile. "Ye - ye didn't have to do that."

"Of course I did. We women need to stick together."

"Women?" Her soft brows knit together in bewilderment. "But aren't ye a..."

"A hat and a bit of extra cloth," Juliet said, patting her chest where she'd bound her breasts flat. "They leave you alone if they think you're like them. For the most part," she added, thinking of Grant. Speaking of which...

"I'm sorry, but I have to go."

"Wait! Don't go. Take me with you."

"Oh, I really don't think-"

"Please," the barmaid begged. "I - I don't want to be here anymore. I can't. Please, please take me with you."

Juliet frowned. "You don't even know where I'm going."

The maid laughed bleakly as she gestured around the room with a sweep of her hand. "Anywhere is better than here."

Juliet wasn't in the habit of picking up strays, but there was something about the girl that made her want to help. Maybe because that for a different decision, she might have ended up right where the

barmaid was now. Or maybe she was just getting soft. Either way, she couldn't resist her desperate plea. "Find somewhere to hide tonight and go to Ginny's Antiquities on Fleet and West Broad first thing tomorrow morning. Ask for Yeti, and tell him Juliet sent you. He'll see that you are taken care of."

"Thank you," the barmaid cried, clasping her hands together beneath her chin as tears flooded her eyes. "Thank you so much."

"What's your name?"

"Lilly." She dashed at her wet cheeks. "My name is Lilly."

"And mine is Juliet. I'll see you again soon, Lilly."

If I don't end up in Newgate first.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BY THE TIME Grant managed to fight his way to the top of the stairs, Juliet was nowhere to be seen. Cursing under his breath, he slammed open the first door he came to and scared the dickens out of a tiny blonde barmaid.

With a shriek she ran across the room and cowered beside the bed. "Please don't 'urt me," she pleaded, looking up at him out of blue eyes glassy with fear.

"I'm not going to hurt you." Forcing his expression to soften, Grant held up his arms and backed towards the door. "I promise. I'm just looking for someone. A woman - a young man," he corrected himself, for that was how Juliet would appear to anyone in the tavern. "He would have come by this way just a few minutes ago. Thin, wearing a brown hat and a bulky overcoat. About this tall." He moved one of his hands midway up his chest. "Have you seen anyone like that?"

The barmaid slowly stood up. "I - I might 'ave. Why are you looking for her - I mean 'im."

It was a quick slip of the tongue. Hardly noticeable, really. But then it was a runner's job to notice what others missed.

"So you have seen her," he said.

"Maybe I 'ave and maybe I 'aven't. What - what's it to ye?"

"She's stolen something. Quite a few somethings, actually. I'm a runner."

"Ye are going to arrest 'er?" the barmaid cried. "But ye can't do that! She saved me life, she did! Two sailors were trying to...trying to..."

"I understand," he said gently when her bottom lip began to wobble. "Are you all right?"

"I am now, thanks to 'er. She came bargin' in like she owned the place. Then she *shot* the one with the beard. Right in the shoulder, like she's done it a 'undred times before. Didn't even blink."

"That sounds like Juliet," he said with a sardonic twist of his mouth. For all her countless faults – being a thief, liar, and manipulator principle among them – the woman was absolutely fearless. "Did you see where she went?"

"No." The barmaid crossed her arms. Lifted her chin. "An' I wouldn't tell ye even if I did."

"She's a criminal," he said flatly.

"Not to me."

A flash of movement behind the barmaid caught his eye. Crossing the room in three long strides, he drew back the rough square of burlap covering the window and looked out through the dingy glass.

On this side of town there were no gaslights to speak of, but the clouds had parted just enough to release a sliver of moonlight that allowed him to see Juliet's narrow slip of a silhouette as she hurried down the alley. Her hat obscured her brilliant red hair and from this angle he couldn't see her face, but he knew it was her. He felt it, deep

in his bones.

"There you are." Mouth setting in a grim line, he bolted out of the room so fast that Lilly's hair whipped across her cheek.

She jumped when the door hit the wall. Jumped again when it rebounded and slammed shut. For a moment she stood frozen save the quick rise and fall of her chest as she tried to catch the breath that had been stolen from her when she'd been dragged up the stairs and thrown onto the hard mattress. Sickness stirred in her stomach and rose up into her throat as she thought of what the sailors would have done if Juliet hadn't stopped them. What they might *still* do if she did not take measures to guard herself against them.

Pressing a fist against her belly to hold the sickness inside, she hurried to the door. But before her trembling fingers could slide the bolt lock into place it swung towards her with so much strength that she was knocked off her feet.

She landed hard on her backside and her head hit the floor with enough force to send bright dancing lights flashing in front of her eyes. Dazed, she tried to stagger to her feet, only to lose her balance and fall back against the bed. A mewling cry of distress spilled from her lips when she felt strong hands close around her waist and pull her up into a sitting position.

"Stop!" she cried, using what little strength she had left to slap at the stranger's arms. To her surprise he immediately let her go and stepped back, a frown touching the corners of his mouth as he gazed down at her.

"Easy love, I'm not going to hurt ye. I was just seeing if ye were all

right. That was a hard tumble ye took." The concern in his husky voice caught her off guard, as did the warmth in his gaze.

As stunned by his kindness as she had been by the sailor's cruelty, Lilly stared up at him in silence. His eyes were a clear, icy blue surrounded by thick lashes several shades darker than his hair. Thick and wavy, the sleek brown locks tumbled rakishly across his brow. His nose was distinctly shaped, as if it had been broken and reset more than once. His lips were bold and sensual. He had a strong chin and a rigid jawline complete with side whiskers that extended down past his ears, giving him a rakish appearance.

He was, without a doubt, the handsomest man she had ever seen. No that he had much competition. The men who frequented The Lusty Mermaid were not only ugly in appearance, they were ugly in heart and soul.

They were men who leered and pinched and grabbed. Men who thought that because she brought them their ale she ought to sit on their lap and let them paw at her tits and shove their hands up her skirts. They were men who did not see her as a person, but as an object. One to be used and discarded at their will.

"...say, ye are lookin' a touch out of it. How many fingers am I holding up?"

Belatedly realizing that the handsome stranger had been speaking to her while she'd been busy looking up at him like a love-struck fawn, Lilly blinked and drew back when he waved three fingers in front of her face.

"Three," she said automatically. "I'm not blind."

"I didn't say ye were." A line creased the middle of his forehead.
"What's a lovely lass like ye doing in a place like this?"

He thought she was lovely? Lilly felt her cheeks warm as she dropped her gaze to her lap where her hands were clenched together in a tight knot. "It's - it's a long story," she said softly.

"And a hard one, I'd imagine." He held out his hand, palm facing upwards. "Come on, love. Let's get ye somewhere safe."

She studied his fingers. Like the rest of him, they were long and lean. His nails were neatly trimmed and free of dirt, although she could see a rough callous on the pad of his thumb. Biting her bottom lip, she peered up at him through a sweep of pale lashes. "Are you going to rape me?"

"Am I - no. *No*," he said forcibly, blue eyes flashing. "I'm not in the habit of takin' women against their will. Nor do I keep company with any men who do." His gaze softened. "Ye don't have to come with me if ye don't want to. But I think ye would be a great deal better off if ye did."

The last time Lilly had made an impulsive decision it had cost her more than she could have possibly imagined. She had no reason to trust the handsome stranger with the kind voice. No reason to think he was any better than the men who had held her pinned to this very bed. No reason to believe he was the knight in shining armor she had been desperately wishing for all her life.

"All right." She slid her hand slowly over top of his and felt the heat of his skin. The steady throb of his pulse. The strength of his grip as their fingers entwined. *Yes*, she thought. *This feels right*. "I'll go with

you."

JULIET KNEW THE exact moment Grant picked up her trail. She couldn't hear him. Couldn't see him. Couldn't smell him. But she knew he was there, just like she knew that this time she would not be able to elude him.

Even if her ankle was completely healed, she didn't know this part of the East End well enough to outrun a runner. Especially one as quick as Grant. He might have been called The Wolf, but he had the speed of a bloody horse, and there were simply too many alleys that twisted back on themselves or dead ended without warning. Or, worse yet, dumped straight into the Thames.

As she didn't fancy a midnight dip in the river, she angled towards Blackfriars Bridge. If she could reach the bridge - and cross it - she'd be able to disappear into Dickens Square. No matter how fast he was, Grant would never be able to catch her there. It was a veritable bramble thicket of tenements, alleys, and taverns, all of which had multiple entrances and exits.

The fog grew heavier the closer she got to the water's edge. Its smoky tendrils wrapped around her like a lover's embrace as she slowed her pace and squinted into the dark, trying to distinguish where the walkway ended and the bridge began. Nearly a thousand feet long and built of arched stone, it should have been easy to find, but the bloody fog was so thick it was impossible to see more than a few feet in front of her face.

A quiet rustle had her grabbing for her pistol. But when she whirled

around there was no one there. Heart pounding, she strained to see into the impenetrable gray mist.

"Come any closer and I'll shoot." The *click* of the hammer being drawn back emphasized the seriousness of her threat. "I swear I will."

But if Grant heard her that was no sign, only the rhythmic slap of water against the hull of an invisible boat. Somewhere out in the harbor a lone gull cried out, its mournful cry causing a shiver to race down her spine.

To hell with this. Pointing the gun into the fog, she started to back up. One step. Two steps. Three steps. On the fourth she turned and ran.

Cold water soaked her trousers and jacket when she splashed through a puddle. Ignoring the wet, ignoring the dull throbbing in her ankle, she grabbed onto an old mooring pole, boots sliding on the wet dock planks as she made a sharp left hand turn.

She hissed out a breath when splinters gouged into her palm, but didn't slow down. In the distance she could just make out the glow of two tall gaslights. The bridge! She'd found it. She was nearly there. But as if summoned from the depths of hell, a dark rippling shadow suddenly appeared directly in front of her.

With a chortled cry of fury, she slid to a halt. She started to raise her pistol but Grant was one step ahead of her, and she froze when he pointed his gun at the middle of her heart.

Anger and defiance flashed in her eyes as he walked up to her. Yanking the gun out of her hand, he tossed it into the Thames with a careless flick of his wrist. She winced when she heard it hit the water.

It was a foolish thing, to mourn a weapon. But that pistol had saved her life more times than she cared to count. Now it was gone, and with it any hope she had of escape.

"I told you I would find you," he said, his voice a throaty whisper as he leaned in close enough for her to see the throb of his pulse at the base of his neck. "And I always keep my word."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HE'D FINALLY caught her. As Grant met Juliet's defiant gaze, he felt a triumphant surge run hot and heavy through his veins. During his time on Bow Street he had captured his fair share of criminals. Murderers, thieves, and the like. But no victory had ever tasted as sweet as this...nor looked quite so lovely.

Even with her hair hidden beneath an ugly brown cap and mud splattered across her high cheekbones, Juliet was a vision. He hadn't the faintest idea how she managed to pass as a boy. How could any man look at her and not see the luscious curves of a full grown woman? Baggy trousers or not, it was clear – at least to him – that she was pure female. Anyone who thought otherwise was a bloody fool.

"What now, runner?" Her pretty mouth curled in a sneer as she glared up him, inadvertently drawing his gaze to her plump bottom lip. His eyes darkened as he studied her plump pout.

What he wouldn't give to taste her again. To sink his hands into her hair and devour that impudent little mouth in one hungry bite. Transfixed on her lips, he actually started to lift his hand, fingers curling in anticipation of tangling in the silky strands of her

hair...until he remembered that this fierce tigress bit back.

"Now I take you into Bow Street," he said coldly, disguising his desire behind an impassive countenance that could have been carved from stone. "You'll be held there overnight and transferred to the magistrate in the morning for sentencing."

Was that a flicker of *fear* he saw in her eyes? No. It couldn't be. Juliet did not fear anything or anyone. And yet...

"You will not be hurt." He didn't know why he felt the need to reassure her. Juliet was hard and tough and resourceful. Something he'd learned firsthand when she'd stolen his pistol right out from under his nose. But at the moment the woman glaring up at him didn't look hard *or* tough. Behind the sneer he desperately wanted to kiss off her lips she looked frightened...and his chest ached when he thought of her sitting on the floor of a cold cell, that defiant light drained from her eyes and her shoulders slumped in defeat.

As his resolve to arrest her began to waver, he clenched his jaw tight. *She* was the one who had made the decisions that had led to this moment, not him, and he refused to feel sympathy for a common criminal. If Juliet was found guilty and sentenced to prison it would be no less than she deserved for breaking the law. She was no different from the hundreds of other thieves he had arrested over the years. She was not special. She did not mean anything to him.

Or so he told himself.

"If you believe having your freedom taken away doesn't hurt, think again, runner."

"Maybe you should have thought about that before you began a life

of crime."

"And what else would you have had me do?" she demanded with a furious toss of her head that dislodged her hat and sent a mass of Titian curls tumbling down over her shoulders. "Earn five shillings an hour on the flat of my back?"

"No," he said, his gut twisting at the thought of other men touching her. "I would never wish that fate upon any woman."

"Oh, then I suppose you'd rather me starve to death?"

"Do not be ridiculous," he scowled. "There are ways to make a decent wage other than stealing."

"Like what?" she challenged, arching a brow. "A textile worker? I'd rather spend the rest of my life in Newgate. At least I have a better chance of survival there than in some factory."

"Good, because that's exactly where you're going." Tired of arguing with her, he pulled a pair of iron manacles off his belt and held them up in the air. "This is not a negotiation, Juliet. Turn around and hold out your hands."

Her cheeks paled as her gaze dropped to the manacles, but when she looked up at him her eyes were filled with fire. "And if I don't?" she said defiantly.

"Then I'll do this." Sliding his pistol into its holster, he grabbed her left arm just above the elbow and spun her around so she was facing away from him.

"Let me go!" She kicked back at him like a horse, and he grunted in pain when the sturdy heel of her boot connected with his shin. Grunted again with she drove her other elbow into his ribcage.

“It’s over.” The manacles dropped to the ground as he struggled to restrain her before simply pinning both of her hands to her sides. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pulled her snugly against her chest. “It’s over, Juliet.”

“Get your bloody paws off me!” she cried.

“I don’t think you’re in any position to be making demands.”

She began to paint the air blue with curses, but Grant was too distracted by the smell of her hair to take much offense. Carefully tipping his face down – he wouldn’t put it past her to slam her head back and break his damn nose – he inhaled the faintest hint of lavender. He wondered if that was the type of soap she used, for the scent wasn’t potent enough to be a perfume. And then, because he was a virile man holding a squirming woman, he wondered what she would look like in a bath.

Surrounded by bubbles, her auburn curls pinned messily to the top of her head so that a few tendrils clung to her damp skin. Her ivory countenance flushed a delightful, delectable pink. The tops of her breasts skimming the water as she washed herself, slowly trailing the sponge up one long, silky leg...

“That better be your pistol poking me in the back,” she said darkly.

It wasn’t.

Focus on the matter at hand, Hargrave, he ordered himself sternly. Unfortunately that was easier to say than do given what was *in* his hands.

He held eight stones of enraged female who would stab a dagger through his heart the first chance she got. He didn’t know why the

devil that was so arousing, but then nothing about Juliet made any bloody sense.

If he believed in such things, he might have been tempted to think she was a witch...for surely only a supernatural being could make him feel both desire and loathing in such equal measure.

She represented everything that was morally corrupt in London. Everything that was wrong with society. Everything that he had spent his entire adult life trying to fix. And yet...and yet there was a part of him that did not *want* to fix her. There was a part of him that liked the wildness in her. That enjoyed seeing the flash of defiance in her eyes. That craved the violence simmering just beneath the surface.

“What are you doing?” she said warily when his grip loosened just enough to spin her around until they were thigh to thigh, belly to belly, face to face. She stared up him out of sharp green eyes filled with mistrust, her lips curved in a wary frown. “Runner? What are you doing?”

“Something I know I damn well shouldn’t.” Before he could change his mind he sank his hands into her hair, lowered his head, and roughly claimed her mouth with his.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GRANT FELT HIS sanity return when Juliet stiffened and tried to draw away. Part of him was grateful for it, as he knew he never should have kissed her to begin with. And certainly never like this. All raw, restless need and dark desire. Like a bloody wolf howling at the moon. But then he felt her soften...just a small, nearly imperceptible surrender.

And he was lost.

To hell with sanity, he thought as he plunged his tongue between her lips and dined on the sweetness of her mouth. *Who the devil needs it?*

He pressed himself against her and she pressed back, leaning against the hard planes of his body as her hands slid beneath his coat and her nails sank into his chest, summoning a deep growl of pleasure from the depths of his throat.

The kiss deepened into something neither one of them could control. Something neither one of them *wanted* to control as the boundaries separating them blurred and melted away.

At the foot of the bridge with the fog heavy at their feet and the smell of salt water in the air, they were not a runner and a thief, but a man and a woman. Controlled by instinct, driven by passion, they

each took what they wanted and left nothing behind.

Her eyes glazed, Juliet's head fell back as he nipped her earlobe before soothing the bite with a teasing lick. He tried to cup her breasts through the bulky fabric of her shirt, only to find them bound flat. With a snarl of frustration he returned to her mouth, sinking into her soft lips with all the reckless abandon of a ship plunging into a stormy sea. He bit her bottom lip just hard enough to make her quiver, and was rewarded with a mewling whimper of desire that set his blood aflame.

She arched against his throbbing arousal, meeting fire with fire. The flames that burned between them was enough to set London ablaze and Grant would have happily burned to ash if it meant one more second with Juliet in his arms.

His hands dipped to her arse, squeezing her shapely buttocks as his mouth began a blazing descent down the slender column of her throat. She rubbed herself wantonly against him, stretching up on her toes so their pulsing centers met in a combustion of heat that elicited a growl from deep inside of his chest.

Driven half mad with lust, he was tempted to pin her against the mooring post and take her then and there. To rip down her boyish trousers and thrust into her hot, wet little sheath as she cried out his name. Until he felt cold, hard steel prick the side of his neck...and he opened his eyes to find her staring up at him with amusement, a smug little smirk curving her swollen lips.

“What the bollocks are you—”

“Arms behind your head. Slowly,” she warned and he hissed out a

breath when the knife she held pressed against his throat drew blood.

“I don’t want to hurt you, but I will if I have to.”

A myriad of feelings filled Grant as he lifted his arms high in the air and locked his hands together behind his head.

Confusion.

Fury.

Disbelief.

Lust.

Even now, with a dagger at his neck and Juliet’s slender fingers wrapped around the handle, he still wanted her. And if that wasn’t the very definition of lunacy, he didn’t know what was.

Fool me once, shame on you.

Fool me twice, shame on me.

Fool me thrice...

A muscle high in his right cheek began to pulse as his teeth clenched together with so much force he felt something in his jaw give an audible *pop*. He never should have kissed Juliet the first time, let alone the second. What the hell had he been thinking?

That was the problem, he realized. He *hadn’t* been thinking. Where Juliet was concerned all of his logic and common sense flew out the bloody window. She was a siren to his sailor, and for the second time in a row he’d gleefully wrecked his ship upon the rocks just for a taste of her lips.

“Now take your pistol and any other weapons you have and toss them into the river. Keep one hand behind your head and your eyes on me.” A flash of silver moonlight reflected off the blade of her knife

as she took a step back. Grant was tempted to lunge forward and overpower her, but he knew it was often better to bide one's time until an opportunity presented itself.

A lesson he'd learned the hard way from a certain red-haired vixen with a penchant for sharp objects.

Wondering how the devil he was going to explain losing another gun to the other runners, he slowly withdrew his pistol from its holster and his knife from his boot and threw them both into the Thames, his burning gaze never leaving Juliet's.

"What now?" he asked, the two words more of a taunt than a question. "I told you before. I'll chase you to the ends of the earth. If you want me to stop, you're going to have to kill me. Do you have that in you, little tigress? The ability to kill a man? It's harder than it seems."

"I know how hard it is," she snapped.

"Then what are you waiting for? Oh, that's right. You don't want to hurt me unless you have to." And because his pride was wounded, and because he wanted to hurt Juliet as she had hurt him, he said the cruelest thing he could think of. "Tell me, have you whored yourself out to other runners or should I consider myself special?"

The slur was beneath him, and he regretted it even before her cheeks turned white and the knife trembled in her hand.

"Juliet, I apologize. I didn't mean—"

"I am not a whore, I'm a thief." Her eyes flashed a dark, dangerous shade of green as her hand steadied. "And you can pretend otherwise all you want, runner. But *you* kissed *me*."

“You’re right. I did.” His hands latched onto his hair in frustration, pulling the ebony curls taut as he continued to stand with his arms bent behind his head. “But I shouldn’t have, and I am sorry for taking advantage of you.”

She lifted her chin. “No one takes advantage of me.”

“Are you saying you enjoyed the kiss?” He managed to keep his tone indifferent, as if he didn’t give a donkey’s arse one way or the other, but there was no denying the quickening in his loins as he recalled the way she’d quivered when he had run his tongue along the delicate curved shell of her ear.

Had the kiss meant something to her, as it had meant something to him? Or had it just been another means to an end, like the first?

“I’m saying...” She hesitated, and he could all but see the gears in her clever mind spinning and turning as she considered her answer. “I’m saying it wasn’t the worst kiss I’ve ever had.”

“So you’ve kissed other men.” And why the hell that should invoke a sharp pang of jealousy he hadn’t the faintest idea.

Not yours, he reminded himself. *She’s not yours, Hargrave, and even if she were – since when have you gotten your bollocks in a twist over a woman’s sexual history? The more experienced the better, remember?*

Yes, that had always been his personal motto before...and one of the reasons he’d gravitated towards widows and mistresses and actresses with a long line of lovers attached to their names. He’d known he wasn’t their first, just as he’d known he wouldn’t be their last. And he was grateful for it. Grateful that they knew how the game was played, and when they parted ways they would do so amicably,

with no hard feelings between them. No feelings at all, to be precise.

It was how he preferred it. How he'd *always* preferred it. So why was his blood beginning to boil at the mere *thought* of another man tasting the honeyed sweetness of Juliet's lips? Maybe she really was a witch. It was the only thing that made any bloody sense, because desiring a woman who kissed him one moment and drew a knife on him the next certainly didn't.

"Whether I've kissed another man is none of your business. We're not friends, runner."

"You're right." He rocked back on his heels, a roguish grin lifting one corner of his mouth. "We're not. Because I sure as hell don't kiss friends like I just kissed you."

She arched a brow. "I'm willing to bet you don't try to put them in manacles, either."

"You'd be surprised."

Her reply was a snort. "So what now?" she asked, expertly tossing the knife from one hand to the other. "I run away, you chase me."

"We kiss," he interceded.

"That's not going to happen again."

"Is that another bet?" he asked, enjoying himself despite the blade pointing at his heart.

"Maybe it is."

"Let's put ten shillings on it, then."

The slight widening of her eyes was the only indication he'd managed to catch her off guard. "You really want to bet on if we're going to kiss again?"

“Afraid you’ll lose?”

She gave a haughty toss of her head. “Maybe you should just give me the ten shillings now and save yourself the trouble.”

“I fear my pockets are empty.”

“That’s a pity.”

“Yes,” he said, staring deep into her eyes. “It is.”

She held his unwavering gaze without blinking and they stared at each other in silence, neither of them wanting to be the one who looked away first. Neither of them wanting to display anything that could be seen as a weakness. Neither of them wanting to admit what they were both beginning to feel in their hearts.

“What now, runner?” she asked quietly.

It was a simple question, but there was no simple answer.

“Now...now you run, and I catch you, and you stand before the magistrate.” Even as he spoke the words out loud they sat ill in his stomach, like the fish he’d eaten at Lady Harrington’s dinner party. “There’s no other way this can go, Juliet. You know that as well as I.”

“What if I promise to never steal again?”

“Justice would still need to be served.”

“Justice.” Her mouth twisted in a bitter smile. “Justice is not as black and white as you runners like to pretend. No one is perfect. No one is without sin. Not even you.”

“I never claimed to be,” he said stiffly.

“You don’t have to claim something to believe it.”

“What do you want from me, Juliet?” Frustration edged his tone. He knew what she was asking, but he couldn’t do it. He wouldn’t. Not

unless he was willing to give up what made him who he was.

Some men defined themselves by their titles. Others by the number of estates they owned or how much money they had in their coffers. But Grant had always defined himself by something else. Something that couldn't be bought or sold. Something that had no monetary value, but was worth more to him than all the gold in the world.

His integrity.

If he gave that up...who would he be? What would he become?

"If you come with me willingly, I'll put in a good word for you." Even as he said the words out loud, he knew Juliet would never surrender. Her wild spirit was as much a part of her as his honor was a part of him. "That's the best I can do. I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for. You're only doing your job." She hesitated, and like a veil being dropped to reveal a painting, the guard she kept over her emotions slipped, giving him a rare glimpse of the vulnerability she kept hidden from the rest of the world. "Do you know, I sometimes wonder how different my life would have been if I'd been born in a fancy house instead of a root cellar." A wry smile flitted across her face. "I always thought it would impossibly boring and dull. All those dresses to wear and balls to attend."

"Don't forget the dinner parties," Grant said dryly.

"Of course." Her smile faded as she met his gaze. "But now...now I don't think it would be dull or boring at all."

"Juliet." He reached for her without thinking, only to leap back with a startled curse when her knife sliced through his coat. "Bloody hell! Watch what you're doing with that thing. You could have

stabbed me.”

“If I had wanted to stab you, you would be bleeding.” Any traces of vulnerability vanishing behind a sneer, she started to edge towards the bridge. “It’s been lovely chatting with you runner, but I’ve other things to do.”

“I’ll be collecting those ten shillings sooner than you think.” He could have easily gone after her. They both knew it. But instead he let her go, sliding his hands into his pockets as he watched her saunter away into the heavy wall of gray fog.

“Soon,” he repeated quietly. “Very soon.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nine Months Later

St. James Park, London

JULIET SAUNTERED THROUGH the crowded park with a spring in her step and a glint in her eye. Dressed in a pale blue muslin walking dress, matching bonnet, and soft green shawl, she blended in perfectly with the ladies who had turned out in droves for their daily constitutional.

On the main thoroughfare curricles and buggies raced past one right after the other, pulled by energetic horses eager to stretch their legs after a long winter spent slogging through the snow and the slush. Children, their pockets heavy with breadcrumbs, flocked to the pond to feed the quacking ducks while their nannies struggled to keep pace.

The breeze that fluttered through the trees was warm. The sun was bright. The sky a clear, cloudless blue. It was a beautiful spring day. One made even more beautiful by the smell of old money and the sapphire necklace Juliet was following.

The necklace was attached to the Dowager Duchess Glastonbury, an elderly woman who'd recently lost her husband to old age and a weak

heart. To add insult to injury, the lecherous old goat had been found arse up in the bed of his mistress.

Word had it the dowager was so enraged and humiliated she planned on holding a public auction at the end the week to sell off all the jewelry the late duke had given her over the course of their long - and clearly tumultuous - marriage. It was a thumb in the face of a man who had prided himself on maintaining a perfect public image while indulging in all manners of sinful decadence behind closed doors.

Word *also* had it that among the things the dowager planned on auctioning off was a diamond tiara that had once belonged to Queen Anne, the last monarch of the House of Stuart. If that was true, it would make the tiara invaluable.

Although Juliet was fairly confident she could manage to come up with a price for it.

If she could get her hands on the tiara before it went up for auction, she would never need to steal anything again. She and Bran could retire from their life of crime and spend the rest of their days traveling the world. She'd always wanted to see Spain and India.

Wherever they went, she already knew they would never be able to return to London. Or at least she wouldn't. Although she'd gone to great pains over the past nine months to stay out of trouble and keep her head down, she knew Grant was still out there searching for her. She hadn't seen him with her own eyes, but there had been whispers of The Wolf prowling through the East End. Why, just last week little Johnny Reed had sworn up and down he'd seen the runner having a

pint at The Lusty Mermaid. A story two barmaids had been only too happy to corroborate.

Giving up her life of crime (even if just temporarily) had been one of the hardest things Juliet had ever done, but she had known it was either that or find herself in Newgate. For it hadn't been a question of *if* Grant would catch her. It had been a question of *when*. And after their last encounter she hadn't been willing to take any more chances. Especially when she couldn't trust herself around him.

He brought out things inside of her she didn't recognize. Feelings she didn't want. Weaknesses she didn't need. So instead of tempting fate a third time, she'd simply...disappeared.

This was the first time she'd come out in the open since Blackfriars Bridge. She felt like a field mouse scurrying out into a farmer's field while a hawk soared in circles high above the clouds. Albeit a field mouse armed to its little buckteeth. If Grant swooped out of the sky, she'd be ready.

"Excuse us." A haughty voice interrupted Juliet's thoughts as a trio of women, led by a cool-eyed blonde with a pale, thin face, stopped in the middle of the walking path and glowered down their noses at her. "You are in our way."

Juliet blinked. There was plenty of room for the women to walk around her, but apparently they were of the opinion that the middle of the stone-covered path was reserved for them and them alone. Knowing a bully when she saw one - or in this case, three - she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin, her gaze flicking to the lady on the left and the lady on the right before centering on the one in the

middle.

"Perhaps *you* are in *my* way. Did you ever consider that?" she asked.

The blonde's mouth dropped open, drawing Juliet's eye to a distracting brown mole nestled just above her upper lip. "Who do you think you are?" she demanded haughtily.

"I know who *I* am. Who the bollocks do you think *you* are?"

The woman on the right let out a scandalized gasp. "Lady Ashburn, we should keep walking." She looked quickly around. "People may start talking."

"Oh no." Juliet's eyes widened with exaggerated concern. "What do you think they might *say*?"

She'd never understood the nobility's obsession with gossip. They pretended to avoid it at all costs, but at the first opportunity they used it to tear one another to shreds. Like a pack of blood-thirsty wolves turning on each other.

Lady Ashburn's mole stretched to the side as her mouth curled in a sneer. "Do you think I don't know your type? Your dress is two seasons out of date and I wouldn't even make my lady's maid wear such a hideously old bonnet. You're nothing more than a grasping little opportunist looking for a wealthy man to sink your claws into."

"You got all that from my refusing to move out of your way?" Juliet slowly clapped her hands together in a mocking round of applause. "Bravo. You've pegged me, all right. That's why I came to the park today. Not for some fresh air, but to find myself a rich husband and - what was it? Ah, yes. Sink my claws into him." Grinning, she lifted her arms with her fingertips curled inwards. "*Rawr*."

"Anna, Kate, come along. The poor thing is clearly deranged." Picking up her skirts, Lady Ashburn sailed past with her nose so high in the air Juliet wouldn't have been surprised if it started spurting blood. Her companions scurried after her like two puppies heeling to their master's side, leaving Juliet standing alone.

"Snobby bitches," she muttered under her breath. Adjusting the brim of her hideously old bonnet, she scanned ahead for a glimpse of the Dowager Duchess, but the older woman and her retinue were nowhere to be seen. They must have stepped into a carriage or gone down a different walking trail.

Snatching the bonnet off her head in a fit of frustration, Juliet threw it down and ground it into the dirt with the heel of her boot. She *needed* that tiara. But to get to the tiara, she had to get to the Dowager Duchess first. And now, courtesy of a snide nabob with a mole the size of Hyde Park, all of her efforts had come to naught.

Eyes narrowing to thin slits of annoyed green, she turned and watched as Lady Ashburn and her two companions flounced away down the path. She'd promised herself – and Bran – she wouldn't partake in any petty thievery. But surely a *little* robbery wouldn't hurt anything. Besides, she needed to make certain her reflexes were still top notch before she attempted the crime of the century.

And Lady Ashburn had just given her the perfect target.

Lips curving in a secretive little smile, she continued walking. But she'd no sooner gone more than a hundred yards when the back of her neck began to tingle.

She kept moving at a normal pace, giving no indication that she felt

a pair of eyes on her back, when she came to a sharp bend in the trail. Ducking swiftly behind a tall tree that had vines creeping up one side of its massive trunk, she drew a dagger out from beneath the folds of her shawl and held it at the ready. If Grant thought to get the drop of her, he was going to have to be a bit sneakier at it.

But when she jumped out from behind the tree, no one was there. The trail was completely empty. Frowning, she slowly tucked the knife away. But she couldn't shake the feeling of someone watching her, and like a mouse scurrying back to its den after it saw the shadow of a hawk rippling across the ground, she promptly returned to the East End.

BLOOD SPRAYED OUT of Hayworth's mouth as Belcher delivered a powerful uppercut. The crowd roared as he staggered back against the ropes. For a moment it looked as though he was going to collapse, but out of sheer will and determination he managed to stay on his feet. Swaying drunkenly from side to side, he tried to land a blow to Belcher's ribcage. With a taunting laugh his opponent danced nimbly out of the way.

"Come on you big bastard," Grant said between clenched teeth, the fifty pound note he'd bet on the boxing match crumpled in his fist. "Get your balance. There's a lad. Now lean in and – bloody hell."

Hayworth struck with the strength and speed of a rampaging bull. Belcher's feet actually left the ground as the punch to his jaw sent him sailing backwards. He landed flat on his back and this time made no attempt to rise. The umpire pried back his eyelids, tapped his cheeks,

and when there was no response save a painful groan, jerked Hayworth's arm in the air and declared him the winner by knockout.

"Son of a bitch." Discarding his note in disgust, Grant fought his way through the chanting crowd. '*Belcher, Belcher!*' they screamed, men and women alike clambering to get closer to the best boxer to ever come out of Bristol. The entire root cellar shook as hundreds of feet pounded the ground. Ale began to flow as entire kegs were rolled down from upstairs, and Grant helped himself to a frothy pint before he found the nearest exit.

Blessedly cool, fresh air greeted him as he stepped out into the alley behind Darby McCall's, a renowned gentleman's club on the outskirts of the theatre district. Every Thursday night the club hosted a boxing match that drew crowds from all over London. Although boxing was discouraged by the magistrates, the runners had unanimously agreed to turn a blind eye as long as no one was hurt – aside from the boxers themselves, of course.

For the larger matches Owen sent someone along to keep an eye on things, and tonight Grant had drawn the short straw. It wasn't that he minded the blood sport. Hell, there was no denying it was entertaining. Watching two men pummel one another with their bare fists was appealing to his baser instincts. Also appealing to his baser instincts? A woman with curves in abundance and a sultry little smile.

"Lord Hargrave, you came." Lettie Higgins, a comely barmaid he'd dallied with on more than one occasion, wrapped herself around him before he'd taken two steps through the door of The Pony, a small, noisy pub two blocks away from McCall's.

“Not yet, love,” Grant said with a wicked grin as he wrapped his arm around Lettie’s slender waist and escorted her to an empty table near the bar. “But I intend to.”

“Oh!” she gasped, playfully striking his arm. “You’re so *very* naughty.”

Hauling the blonde into his lap, he skimmed his hands beneath her breasts before settling them around her waist. “I’ll show you just how naughty I am before the night is through.”

To his own ears the words sounded hollow. Forced. But if Lettie noticed she gave no indication, which was just as well because Hawke had arrived.

Lumbering up to the table, the large Runner gave a grunt of acknowledgement as he settled into his seat and glowered down at the table.

“Colin’s not with you?” Grant asked. They’d planned to discuss their dock case over a couple of pints. It had been almost a year since he’d questioned Captain Jim, and even though they’d made a few arrests, they’d yet to discover the man behind the operation. The one Jim had called Mallack.

Grant had an especially vested interest in finding the bastard after Jim had been hauled out of the Thames...with a knife sticking out of the middle of his back. The sailor had been as harmless as an old toothless dog, and he hadn’t deserved to die in the murky water he’d devoted his entire life to. Grant didn’t have any proof Mallack had been the one who had killed him. But he trusted his gut, and his gut told him the bastard was guilty as sin.

“No.” Hawke didn’t offer any further explanation and knowing that trying to get an answer out of him consisting of more than three syllables would be the equivalent squeezing gold out of a rock, Grant didn’t even bother.

“I guess it’s just us then.” He pinched Lettie’s hip. “Why don’t you be a love and go find a pretty face for our friend–”

“And Felix.”

“You invited *Spencer*? Why the hell would you go and do that?”

Hawke shrugged.

Perfect, Grant thought sourly as he slumped back in his chair. *Just bloody perfect*. First he’d lost fifty pounds on a bet he never should have made in the first place, and now he was going to have to share a pint with a common criminal.

He didn’t care how accepting the other runners were of Felix Spencer. In his eyes, a thief was a thief. Unless she had hair as bright as winter fire and skin as pale as moonlight...

No.

His jaw clenched as he forced his thoughts in a different direction. He may not have been able to stop himself from thinking about Juliet when he was asleep, but he’d be damned if he allowed her to take over his mind while he was awake.

Her complete and total disappearance infuriated him as nothing else ever had. Like a fox escaping into its den, she had gone underground and no matter where he looked or who he questioned, he couldn’t find her.

He told himself his anger stemmed from letting a criminal escape,

something he'd never done before. But the truth – the truth he dared not admit even to himself – was that he feared something had happened to her. The East End and its rookeries were no place for a woman. Even one as vicious and cutthroat as Juliet. If she'd been harmed in some way, or worse...

“Ow,” Lettie exclaimed when his grip unconsciously tightened. “You’re hurting me.”

“Sorry love.” He offered her an apologetic smile when she twisted in his lap to glare at him. Sweeping her silky blonde hair to the side, he nuzzled her neck. But the display of affection – once so natural – felt painfully forced, and frustration mounted within him when his cock failed to so much as twitch.

Ten bloody months. That was how long he'd been without a woman. Having one nestled on top of his crotch – especially one who looked and felt like Lettie – should have ignited his blood and sent him bounding for the nearest bedroom. But no matter how many pretty wenches he used to try to rouse his cock from its self-imposed hibernation, the damned thing remained stubbornly asleep.

He could come up with half a dozen reasons why his body had absolutely zero interest in Lettie, but he really only needed one.

She wasn't Juliet.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“HERE YE ARE gents. As promised.” Sauntering back up to the table with three pitchers of ale in hand, Felix Spencer slid one to Hawke, the other to Grant, and kept the third for himself. Casually dressed in gray trousers, a white cotton shirt that was open at the collar, and a loose fitting brown jacket, the thief-turned-runner blended in perfectly with The Pony’s preferred clientele of middle-class riff raff.

Felix had arrived shortly after Grant and since then the three men – in addition to Lettie, who remained firmly ensconced on Grant’s lap – had been passing the time with idle chat and ale.

“Damn well took you long enough,” Grant muttered as he lifted his tankard.

“It’s a bleedin’ madhouse in here.” Felix braced his arm against the back of his chair and looked over his shoulder. The Pony had become so crowded that the serving wenches were struggling to get to their tables which was why they’d sent Felix up to the bar. When he was younger, Grant had preferred the refined elegance of a gentleman’s club to a cramped tavern that smelled like sweat and stale beer, but since becoming a runner he’d come to appreciate the allure of a noisy pub.

“The match at Darby McCall’s just ended.” Grant offered Lettie a sip of his ale, but with a delicate sniff she shook her head.

“Never touch the stuff. Tastes like horse piss to me.”

He couldn’t say he disagreed.

“Who won?” Felix asked, one dark brow rising.

“Belcher,” Hawke grunted unexpectedly from the corner. He’d been so quiet Grant had nearly forgotten he was there.

“It speaks,” Felix said with a grin.

“Sod off,” Hawke muttered into his tankard.

“Hawke’s right,” Grant said, tipping his ale in the behemoth’s direction. “Belcher took it in the third round. Complete knockout.” A grimace contorted his features. “Hayworth never saw it coming.”

With a knowing smirk Felix asked, “How much did ye lose?”

“What makes you think I bet against Belcher?”

“Because ye never pick the winner.”

Arrogant pup, Grant thought silently.

“I could have this time,” he said, shifting Lettie to his left thigh as he straightened in his chair and met Felix’s mocking grin with a cool, unblinking stare.

“But ye didn’t,” Felix said cheerfully, speaking with the confidence of someone who knew they were right beyond a single shadow of a doubt. Which he was, loathe as Grant was to admit it.

His inability to win a wager was the worst kept secret on Bow Street. Whoever he chose – whether it be a boxer, or a horse, or a bloody turtle in a turtle race – always ended up coming in last. It would have been amusing if it wasn’t so damned irritating, and if he

believed in such nonsense he would have thought he was cursed. As it was, he chalked it up to bad luck. But what Felix didn't know – what no one knew – was that there was one bet he had no intention of losing.

No matter how long it took.

"No," he admitted, shaking his head in self-disgust. "Only would have lost half that if Hayworth had stayed on his feet but the bastard went down like a pile of bricks."

Felix coughed into his tankard. "Fifty soddin' pounds! Jesus. If ye wanted to toss your money away ye could have just given it to me."

"Wasn't Lady Irvine's necklace worth three times that?" Grant asked, never above reminding Felix of where he'd come from...and where he'd return to if Grant had anything to say about it.

"Aye," Felix said carelessly, "but a tight-assed bounder made me give it back."

"I never liked boxing," Lettie interceded, her sweet voice helping to temper the prickling wall of animosity between Felix and Grant. She gave a tiny shudder. "Too much blood for my taste."

"That's what makes it interesting, sweetheart," said Grant, stroking her arm more out of habit than any true gesture of affection. "That's what men pay to see."

"Well I think it's vile."

"Do you know what else is vile?" Determined to wake his cock the hell up, Grant cupped Lettie's ear and whispered a wicked suggestion that made her gasp and slap at the hand that was stealing up her skirts.

“You are *so* very naughty,” she cooed with delight.

“I believe that is my cue to leave. Gentleman.” His nod towards Felix noticeably shorter than the one he gave Hawke, he tossed Lettie effortlessly over his shoulder and headed for the door. A sharp whistle and a hackney for hire all but stopped in its tracks. The inside smelled of moldy velvet and something else which he didn’t even want to contemplate, but such accommodations were only to be expected this far east of Grosvenor Square.

“23 Hawthorne Lane,” he told the driver as he tossed Lettie onto the springboard seat and climbed in after her. With a squeal she clambered to the opposite end of the hackney, but not before flipping her skirts up and offering him a tantalizing view of her rosy pink thighs.

“Why Miss Charlotte,” he drawled, a seductive gleam in his sharp green gaze as his arm shot out and captured her wrists above her head. “I don’t believe you’re wearing any undergarments.”

“Maybe you should check for yourself,” she purred, her legs falling apart in an open invitation that Grant willed himself to receive. But when he began to kiss her neck he found himself yearning for the scent of lavender. And when he glanced at the hair caught in his hands he was disappointed to find it wasn’t red.

“Bloody *hell*,” the curse tore itself from the depths of his chest as he flung himself away from Lettie. Hands clenching into knotted fists of frustration and bewilderment, he threw back his head and glared at the ceiling.

“Lord Hargrave?” Lettie questioned uncertainly. He heard the creak

of the seat as she sat up, and then the quiet rustle of fabric as she straightened her dress. “What’s wrong?”

Juliet, he thought darkly. *Juliet is what’s wrong.*

His little jewel thief had ruined any other woman for him...and then she’d disappeared like a white rabbit into a magician’s hat, never to be seen or heard from again. Every time he thought about their last kiss it filled him with unspeakable anger...and uncontrollable lust.

He’d kissed Lettie – and others – in the hopes that it would make him forget her, but it only seemed to make his yearning for her worse. In all his life he had never felt anything like this. It was a weight he couldn’t shake off. A dark cloud he couldn’t escape. Over the past nine months he’d spent time with some of the most beautiful women in all of England. And yet every single one had paled in comparison to Juliet.

If they had her beauty, they lacked her spirit. If they had her spirit...

Well, that was the ruddy problem, wasn’t it?

No one had her spirit.

“I’m sorry, Lettie. I shall have my driver return you to The Pony and I’ll compensate you for your time.”

They’d reached their destination: Grant’s residence, a stately three-story townhouse that sat back from the street behind a long wrought-iron fence. Cream stucco over brick, it blended in perfectly with the rest of the townhouses in the terrace. Brass lanterns mounted on either side of the front door glowed in the darkness, spilling light onto a narrow brick pathway lined with neatly trimmed shrubs.

A footman dressed in navy blue livery opened the door, letting in a welcome rush of sweet smelling spring air into the stale interior of the hackney. Stepping down without assistance of a block, Grant turned and braced his hand on the doorframe.

“Will you be all right to return by yourself?” he asked Lettie, who smirked and rolled her eyes.

“Your concern for me is touching, Lord Hargrave, but I think I will be able to manage.” Her gaze dipped pointedly to his trousers before flicking back to his face. “I believe the real question is will *you* be all right.”

“I’m fine,” he said stiffly.

“Really? Because in all the time we’ve known each other I’ve never once left a carriage with my hair still in place. And look.” She gently patted her coiffure. “Not a single pin undone. I know it’s not *me*. And as there are only two of us in this little scenario...”

“You’re excused,” Grant told the footman as Lettie’s voice trailed away. Waiting until the servant was out of earshot, he pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed heavily. “You’re right. It’s not you.” Were it any other woman – or man, for that matter – he would have bitten his tongue. But he trusted Lettie not to say anything. More than that, he trusted whatever advice she might be able to give him. If anyone understood the intricate workings of the human mind and body, it was the infamous Charlotte Green.

Lettie might have pretended to be an empty-headed piece of fluff when she was at The Pony, but they’d spent enough time together outside of the pub for him to know that she was actually quite witty

and very intelligent.

“Would you like to come in for a glass of wine?” he asked.

“Is that *all* I’d be coming in for?”

“I’m afraid so.”

She thought about it for a moment, then shook her head. “Sorry darling, but the night is still young and I’ve my eye on a handsome viscount back at The Pony. Word has it he’s on the hunt for a mistress. But enough about me.” She waved her hand in the air. “What in dickens name is wrong with *you*? I’ve known plenty of men whose flags have failed to sail at full mast, but you’ve never been one of them.”

Grant gritted his teeth. “Do you think I don’t bloody know that?”

“Well?” Lettie said with an expectant arch of her brow.

“There’s...a woman,” he began, choosing his words carefully. No one knew who Juliet was or what she meant to him. Hell, even *he* didn’t know that. All he’d told the captain was the jewel thief he was chasing after was a female...and that she’d gone to ground. Owen had put him on other cases, but he’d made it clear he wanted an arrest made whenever she resurfaced.

“There always is,” Lettie said dryly. “Go on. Who is she? A fair-haired debutante who collects lace doilies and plays the harp?”

Grant didn’t bother to suppress his snort. “Not exactly. She’s a bit... rough around the edges.”

“A commoner.” Lettie’s eyes lit up. “How intriguing. I take it you haven’t introduced her to your dear mum.”

“No,” he said shortly. “She’s not fit for polite company.”

“Well, I must say she doesn’t sound at all like your usual sort.”

That was the understatement of the century.

“She isn’t,” he admitted, rubbing his chin. “She is not like anyone I have ever met before. She grew up in St Giles and as a result she’s more wild than tame.” His forehead creased in a scowl. “Not to mention she’s drawn a pistol on me. Twice.”

“Have you taken a flyer with her yet?”

“What the devil does that have to do with anything?” he demanded.

“I shall take that as a no.” Lettie rolled her eyes. “You fancy nabobs are all the same. You are so accustomed to getting what you want, when you want it, that you’ve forgotten what it feels like to chase after something. Or in this case, someone. It’s like dangling a piece of sweet meat in front of a baby. The baby doesn’t really want the sweet meat. No one *likes* sweet meat. But it desires what it cannot have to the point where it will disregard all other treats until it gets what it wants.”

“You’re saying I only want this woman because I cannot have her?”

“Well, either that or you’ve fallen head over heels in love with her.” Her expression vaguely pitying, she leaned forward and patted his hand. “Either way, you need to find her and bed her. A good, satisfying romp fixes everything, to my way of thinking. When it’s done you’ll still want her or you won’t, but at least you’ll have your answer.”

Love?

Grant scoffed at the very idea.

He wasn't in *love* with Juliet. That would be almost as ridiculous as kissing a thief. His jaw tightened. Could what he was feeling actually be...

No.

Absolutely not.

"Thank you for the suggestion, Lettie. But I'm afraid it's not going to work in this case. The last thing I should do is sleep with her."

Perhaps if he said it out loud he would actually believe it.

The blonde's shoulders lifted and fell in an elegant shrug. "Have it your way. I do hope your little problem resolves itself soon. It's a dread shame to have to keep such a handsomely endowed stud in the stables."

Grant stepped back, giving the hackney room to turn around. "Good luck with your earl."

"Oh darling, I don't need luck." Lettie cupped her breasts and gave them a little jiggle. "I have these." She waited a moment, then glanced down at his crotch. "Anything?"

"No," he said darkly. Lettie's breasts were lovely, but when he looked at them all he thought about was what Juliet's would feel like when he unwrapped them from their bindings. He'd kiss the red marks from her soft, silky skin before he cupped her breasts and suckle one rosy nipple until she made the tiny mewling sound in the back of her throat that set his blood on fire...

Lettie made a *tsking* sound under her breath. "You're worse off than I thought, darling. You need to find this girl, throw her legs up over her head, and tup her silly. There's no other way around it. After

you're done bring her to The Pony," she called out the window as the hackney lurched forward. "I'd like to buy her a drink."

Grant waited until the hackney had turned the corner before he opened the gate, his footsteps falling heavily on the pebble-lined path. A footman was waiting at the door and he gave the young lad a brusque nod before he went up the stairs to his private chamber.

His personal valet had long since gone home for the night, but he'd left a clean nightshirt on the foot of the bed. Stripping down to his breeches, Grant washed his face and arms in a basin of lukewarm water before tossing the nightshirt aside and climbing between the sheets with nothing on save what he'd been born with.

Given the choice, he preferred to sleep in the nude. Particularly after a long, tiresome day when he did not have the patience to fuss with an article of clothing that might as well have been a dress with its ankle-length skirt and floppy collar. He didn't know why Bernard kept insisting on leaving a nightshirt on the bed, other than the fact that he was a cheeky bastard and he knew it annoyed his employer.

Leaning up on his elbow, Grant extinguished the candle on his bedside table with a single breath. With the curtains tightly drawn against the silvery light of a full moon, the room was immediately plunged into darkness. On a heavy sigh he fell back onto his pillow to stare blindly up at the ceiling, willing his mind to think of anything – anything at all – other than what had consumed him every night for the past nine months.

He actually managed to fall asleep without a single blessed thought in his head...but when he dreamed, he dreamed only of Juliet.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

STEALING INTO Lady Ashburn's house and nabbing her necklace had been disappointingly easy. After nearly a year spent twiddling her thumbs, Juliet had been craving a bit of excitement. But the robbery had gone off without a hitch. Now the only thing left to do was sell the necklace before it could be linked back to her, then come up with a foolproof plan to snatch the dowager's tiara before it was sold at auction.

She could always wait until *after* the auction was over, but then she risked the tiara being sold to a foreigner or – even worse – an American. Juliet was determined, but she had no intention of chasing a piece of jewelry across the Atlantic.

No matter how much it was worth.

Which meant she had exactly three weeks to figure out a way past the dowager's ferocious wolfhounds. As tall as a pair of horses and nearly as heavy, the dogs guarded Glastonbury House at all hours of the day and night. They were even fed separately, so if one went in to eat the other was left to prowl the grounds, just waiting to sink its enormous fangs into anyone daring – or stupid – enough to climb the towering iron fence that wrapped around the outside of the property.

If she somehow managed to get past the wolfhounds with all of her limbs intact, she would then have to make it past half a dozen armed brutes that made the Queen's Guard look like a litter of puppies. And that was just to get in the front door!

It was a daunting task not for the weak of heart. One that even Bran, for all his daring, had tried time and again to talk her out of. But she refused to listen. If there was one thing Juliet had learned from being a thief, it was that anything could be stolen. It was just a matter of finding the right way in...and the right way out.

Adjusting the brim of her bonnet so it covered the upper half of her face, she glided past the heavy iron gates guarding the entrance of Glastonbury House and turned left onto Upper Brook Street, a quiet tree-lined avenue that led directly to Hyde Park. It was another bright, sunny morning, albeit a bit cooler than yesterday had been.

Sweet smelling blossoms detached from the cherry trees in a swirl of pale pink, one of them catching in her hair when she paused to pluck a small stone from her shoe. Straightening, she gently tugged the blossom out of her coiffure and twirled it idly between her fingers as she proceeded into the park.

Her mood slightly melancholy – though she didn't know why – Juliet wandered down one of the lesser traveled paths, her countenance one of idle pensiveness as she pondered the task that lay before her.

It would be impossible to sneak into Glastonbury House in the dead of night. Not with the wolfhounds and the guards and who only knew what else. She had to hand it to the dowager; the woman knew how to

protect her valuables and her security had only increased since a recent string of violent robberies had left the *ton* with a general feeling of unease and paranoia.

There *was* one other option, but it was so daringly reckless – even for her – that she’d not seriously considered it...until now.

On the eve of the auction the dowager was hosting an exclusive ball. Invitations had been sent out months in advance. Only the *crème de la crème* had made the cut, and more than one prominent family had been snubbed entirely. It was said to be the Event of the Season, and rumor had it all of the pieces that would be going up for bid were going to be on full display, including the tiara. There were even whispers that the Prince Regent himself would be in attendance and even though his presence had not been confirmed, just the idea that he might be there was enough to send the entire *ton* into a tizzy of speculation.

Suffice it to say, this was one ball where Juliet would not be able to slip in undetected. If she stood any chance of not getting caught, she needed to get her hands on an invitation. As well as a gown and a new identity. Her lips curved as she imagined presenting the butler with her name and title. ‘*Miss Juliet of St Giles*’ had a rather proper ring to it, but she had a feeling a jewel thief from London’s most notorious rookery was *not* on the approved guest list.

Would Grant be there? The unexpected thought stopped her in her tracks. She frowned as she tried to dismiss it, but like a fly in the dead heat of summer it kept buzzing around her head until she acknowledged that yes, he most likely *would* be in attendance. Not

that it mattered.

Oh all right.

Maybe it mattered a little bit.

But *not* because she wanted to see him again.

“Hardly,” she muttered to herself, scuffing the toe of her boot into the dirt before she resumed walking, this time with a purpose, as if she could somehow outrun the traitorous direction of her thoughts.

Thoughts that kept returning to the color of Grant’s eyes....

And the wavy thickness of his hair...

And the weight of his mouth on her mouth...

She was so distracted that she didn’t notice the man following her. Intentionally dressed so to not attract attention, he kept a healthy distance, stopping often to admire a tree or a patch of daffodils. Anyone who happened to glance in his direction would assume he was merely out for a morning stroll. Only someone with Juliet’s experience would look at him and immediately know he was following a mark, but she was too busy trying not to think about Grant that she missed him entirely.

“Will you just stop it,” she told herself crankily, speaking loud enough to draw the attention of two random passerby who stopped and stared, no doubt alarmed by the sight of a young woman talking to herself. An arched brow from Juliet and they hurried on their way, muttering under their breath about ‘riff-raff’ and ‘new money’ and ‘the square not being what it used to be’. She snickered under her breath when she imagined what they would say if they knew who she *really* was.

Then they were gone and the path ahead was empty, leaving her alone with her unwanted thoughts about a man she still secretly desired but could never have, while a man she had never desired continued to follow her.

JULIET WAS BACK.

Anticipation hummed beneath the surface of Grant's impassive countenance as he sat beside Felix in the captain's office and listened to Owen's blistering reprimand as he lectured them on the importance of maintaining clients...something they'd failed to do when Felix had lost his damn mind and tried to strangle Lord Ashburn in his own parlor.

Owen had sent them to the viscount's house to investigate the disappearance of his wife's diamond necklace. Someone – and Grant had a very good idea who – had lifted the piece while Lady Ashburn and her husband had been at a dinner party. In the middle of questioning Felix had lunged at Ashburn with murder in his eyes, and it had taken Grant's considerable strength to restrain him.

He'd suffered a bruised rib for his trouble, as well as the full force of Owen's considerable wrath. It wasn't often the Captain of the Bow Street Runners relinquished control of his temper, but when he did there was hell to pay.

And Grant and Felix were currently paying it.

"I cannot even bloody look at the two of you," Owen snarled, blue eyes flashing before he turned and faced a wall of bookcases. The captain was a fastidiously tidy man, and every book was arranged by author and then size, a task which must have taken him a

considerable amount of time. His desk was just as neat, with nary a single piece of paper out of place. Not too long ago the antique pedestal desk had been devoid of anything personal, but following recent Owen's courtship – and consequential marriage – it now held a framed portrait of his bride, the stunningly beautiful Lady Scarlett Steel.

“Spencer started it.” Maintaining his air of nonchalance, Grant leaned back in his chair and linked his hands behind his head. “He would have clocked Ashburn out cold if I didn't hold him back.”

Felix snorted. Of the two of them he looked by far the worse for wear with a black eye and busted lip, but his battered countenance didn't hold so much as a sliver of remorse. “Ye didn't hold me back, mate.”

“That purple bruise on your face says otherwise.”

“And what about that purple bruise on your mug? Oh wait,” Felix sneered. “That's just your face.”

Grant barked out a laugh. “That's bloody rich coming from the likes of you.”

“Do you find this *amusing*?” Owen's voice may have been whisper soft, but it crashed through the room with all of the force of a deadly tidal wave. Their mouths settling into grim lines, Grant and Felix both straightened in their chairs.

“No Captain,” they said in unison.

“Is your job a *joke* to you?”

“No Captain.”

Owen lectured them for several more minutes before he ordered

them both out of his office. At the last minute he called Felix back, and grateful it hadn't been *his* name that had been spoken, Grant quietly shut the door behind him and continued on down the stairs.

Colin and Hawke were waiting for him in the drawing room. Hazel eyes bright with amusement and a shit-eating grin curling his lips, Colin yanked back a chair and gestured for Grant to sit down beside him.

"Captain didn't sound none too pleased," he said.

"He wasn't." Grant could count on one hand the number of times he'd seen Owen that riled up. "Although I don't know what he expected when he put Spencer and I together," he muttered under his breath as he sat down and reached for the pitcher of coffee sitting in the middle of the table. Pouring himself a lukewarm cup of the bitter brew, he took a sip, grimaced, and then took another.

"Maybe he wanted you to finally put aside your differences?" Colin suggested.

Grant snorted into his coffee. While he preferred his own company when working a case, he didn't mind having a partner from time to time. There wasn't anyone on Bow Street he didn't get along with... except for Spencer. Most likely because Felix Spencer wasn't a partner, he was a liability. And no one would ever be able to convince Grant otherwise, not even Owen.

"This isn't a bloody fairytale," he said, kicking back in his chair. "Spencer and I aren't going to start braiding each other's hair and reciting sonnets to one another, no matter how many times the captain pairs us up."

From across the table Hawke made a sound that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. Or maybe he was just choking on his muffin.

It was hard to tell.

“Well I for one thing think you’d want Spencer’s help with your elusive jewelry thief,” said Colin.

“And why the devil would you say that?” Grant scowled.

Colin shrugged. “She’s from St Giles, isn’t she? Not many thieves with that type of talent. Especially not female ones. He must have heard of her, if he doesn’t know who she is outright.”

“Maybe,” Grant said, unconvinced. If Spencer *did* know something about Juliet that would prove useful, he certainly hadn’t been forthcoming about it...then again, why would he be? There was no love lost between them. Hell, they’d just gone after one another like two feral dogs. Guzzling the rest of his coffee in one distasteful swallow, he drummed his fingers against the table before he scraped his chair back and stood up.

“Where are you off to?” Colin asked.

“To have a word with Spencer.”

“Are we still patrolling the docks tonight? Word has it there’s a new shipment coming in, this one all the way from Bhutan. Mallack could be there.”

But he wouldn’t be. No matter what they did, the bastard always seemed to be one step ahead of them. Two months ago they’d staked out the docks round the clock for seventeen days. Grant had been so exhausted he’d started seeing double. There’d been no sign of Mallack or any of his cronies. Then two days after they’d left, a merchant ship

carrying a small fortune of spices and silks from India had been stripped down to the hull.

“Take Hawke and Brentwood,” Grant ordered. “The lad could use the experience.”

Archer Brentwood was the youngest runner to ever serve on Bow Street, but his eye for detail and his uncanny talent for seeing things others missed was invaluable. Tall and lanky with a shock of red hair and a smattering of freckles that made him look even younger than he was, he spent most of his time pouring over evidence for clues. It was high time he got some experience in the field, and Grant knew that Colin would keep a careful eye on him.

He turned when he heard footsteps on the stairs and managed to intercept Spencer in the foyer before he could duck out the door. “I’d like a word with you.”

“That’s too bad, isn’t it?” Felix’s lips peeled back in a sneer. “Because I’ve nothing to say to ye. Sod off, Hargrave.”

“I want you to tell me everything you know about the thief I’m after.”

“And I want ten thousand pounds and a thirty year old glass of scotch, but we can’t always get what want, can we? Move aside.” Felix tried to push past Grant but he held his ground, absorbing the not-so-small shove Felix delivered to his shoulder with only the faintest hint of grimace.

“You have to know something about her,” he continued, green eyes sharpening on Felix’s face. “You’re about the same age. Mayhap a few years older. You would have run in the same circles at some point.”

Irritation sparked in Felix's gaze as he crossed his arms and glared up at Grant. They squared off like two boxers, neither one willing to take a step back towards the ropes.

"Aye, maybe our paths have crossed a time or two," Felix said at last when it became apparent that if neither man said anything they were going to spend the rest of their day standing in the foyer glaring at one another. "But that was a long time ago. My memory's a bit foggy on the details."

Grant lifted a brow. "It wasn't *that* long ago."

"Information isn't free, Hargrave."

"We're runners, you greedy bastard." Distaste curled back the edges of his mouth. "We don't hide things for one another, or pay for secrets."

Felix tapped the end of his chin. "You're right," he agreed. "But ye don't see me as a runner, do ye? To ye I'll always be a slum thief from the East End." His eyes narrowed. "Except now ye want something I have, so ye've decided I might be useful."

"Fine." As loathe as Grant was to admit it, Felix had a point. "What do you want? Money?"

"Nothing as simple as that. A favor, mate. I want a favor."

"What sort of favor?" he said suspiciously.

Felix shrugged. "Dunno yet. But when I do, I'll let ye know. Do we have a deal?" He held out his hand, and grinned when Grant reluctantly shook it. "That's a lad. See? I knew we'd be best blokes eventually. I jest had to wear ye down with my wit and charm first."

"This doesn't make us friends. Now tell me what you know."

“What does she look like, this jewel thief of yours?”

“I told you before,” Grant gritted out between clenched teeth. “She isn’t *my* jewel thief.”

“Whatever ye say.” Clearly enjoying himself, Felix rocked back on his heels and slipped his hands into the pockets of his trousers. “I still need to know what she looks like if ye want me to help ye. Does she have a name?”

“She calls herself Juliet, but I don’t if–”

“Little Jules,” Felix said softly, a flicker of surprise causing his eyes to widen.

Mrs. Wadsworth chose that precise moment to jump down from the window ledge she’d been sunning herself on and trot over to Grant. Sitting on her sleek haunches she tipped her head back and released a loud meow, little white fangs peeking out from beneath her whiskers as she demanded to be lifted. Never one to turn down a pretty feline, Grant scooped her up and settled the cat on his shoulder, his assessing gaze never leaving Felix. “So you *do* know her.”

“Aye, and I can’t help ye.”

“Cannot or will not?” he pressed.

“Both. Ye want my advice?”

“Not particularly.”

Felix’s teeth flashed in a humorless grin. “Leave the lass alone. She’s never hurt anyone and she doesn’t take from those who can’t afford it.”

It was, word by word, nearly the same thing Juliet had said. He should have known Felix would side with her. They were, after all,

both criminals.

“That doesn’t make her any less guilty. *Someone* is going to catch her sooner or later. The East End is a dangerous place.”

“Jules is a dangerous woman.”

Grant’s jaw clenched. He didn’t like Felix referring to his Juliet by a pet name.

Almost as much as he didn’t like thinking of her as ‘his’ Juliet.

She wasn’t his. She never had been his, and there was not any scenario where she ever *would* be his. Even if she wasn’t a thief and he wasn’t a runner, there were simply too many obstacles in their path. They were from two completely different worlds. Worlds that were separate for a reason. While Grant did not consider himself an elitist, he could not imagine ever introducing Juliet to his parents. When he married – *if* he married – he would not need their approval, of course, but he’d be lying if he said it wasn’t something he wanted.

He could just see it now...the entire family on holiday in the country, his brothers playing a rousing game of shuttlecock, his sister-in-law’s attending the children, his parents relaxing on the portico, and Juliet skulking about upstairs stealing the silver.

“Ye aren’t going to let this go, are ye?” Felix said as he studied Grant’s countenance.

“Have I ever let a criminal go before?” he said shortly.

“No, I suppose not.” There was a gleam in Felix’s eye that he couldn’t quite read. The gleam deepened when Felix said, “If ye have any chance of tracking Jules down, you’ll need to find Bran first.”

“Bran?” Grant’s brows drew together over the bridge of his nose.

“Who the devil is Bran?”

“You’re the runner.” Felix lifted two fingers to his temple in a cheeky salute before he patted Mrs. Wadsworth on her head and opened the door. “You figure it out.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“NO,” BRAN SAID FLATLY. “Absolutely not.”

Juliet rolled her eyes as she picked up her jewelry box and fished around the various glittering baubles – all stolen – before settling on a pair of pearl earrings. They weren’t particularly flashy but they were large, and nothing said understated elegance (or wealth) like pearls. Sliding them into her ears, she piled her hair on top of her head and turned her face this way and that, studying the effect the earrings had on her profile in the mirror’s silvery reflection.

They’d do, she thought with a satisfied curve of her lips. But Bran’s bossiness certainly wouldn’t.

“I don’t need your permission, you know.” She met his gaze in the mirror. “You’re not my keeper.”

“Well someone should be,” he snapped, the corners of his mouth tightening. “I thought ye were supposed to be in hiding.”

“I *was* in hiding,” she corrected as she selected a matching pearl choker and looped it around her neck, biting the inside of her cheek as she struggled with the tiny clasp. “For the better part of a year. Bugger it. Why the devil can’t they make these easier to – ah. Got it.”

“Is tha’ Lady Flintlock’s necklace?”

“Maybe.”

“I didn’t know ye were the one who snatched it,” Bran said, sounding impressed despite his anger at what he deemed ‘a bloody suicide mission’.

With only one week to go until the dowager’s ball, Juliet was determined to secure herself an invitation. Unfortunately, stealing one hadn’t been as easy as she’d anticipated. It seemed the ladies of the *ton* valued their social standing more than their jewelry, and the silly nits had been sleeping with their invitations tucked beneath their pillows, making them all but impossible to snatch. Which meant she was going to have to get her invitation the hard way.

“There’s plenty of things you don’t know about me,” she said loftily.

“Aye,” Bran acknowledged. “Including how the ‘ell ye are going to pull this off. Runners and peelers are going to swarming all over the place.”

“It’s a garden soiree, not a hornet’s nest. I’m going to sneak in, charm the dowager into giving me an invitation to her ball, and sneak back out again before anyone is the wiser. What could possibly go wrong?”

“Oh, I dunno.” Bran tapped his chin. “How about bloody *everything*? This is High Society we’re talkin’ about, Jules. It’s an entirely different beast.”

“Are you saying I’m not going to fit in?” Turning away from the mirror, she lifted her skirts and did a quick spin. “Because I think I look splendid.”

The dress she’d paid an exorbitant fortune to have finished in less

than twenty-four hours was a light, frothy concoction of pale green muslin overlaid with a sheer layer of white silk threaded with gold. The capped sleeves showed off her slender arms while the dropped bodice revealed a tasteful amount of bosom. She'd fashioned her long auburn curls into a braided twist on top of her head and secured the style with a jeweled hair comb in the shape of a butterfly. Several tendrils trailed down along the side of her face and neck, accentuating the delicate curve of her jaw. She knew she'd never looked better, just as she knew that no one who saw her at the soiree would think her out of place.

Juliet may not have been born a lady, but she had no difficulty imitating one. As far as she was concerned a donkey in a dress could do it. The genteel nobility may have thought themselves far superior to the common born man, but the truth of the matter was that beneath their expensive gowns and clouds of perfume and fake laughter they were just like everyone else.

Bran gritted his teeth. "I'm not going to fill yer head with flattery. Ye know ye look the part and aye, that tiara is as fine a piece as there's ever been, but is it worth getting' yerself strung up by the neck for? What if The Wolf is there?"

"He won't be," she said confidently.

"And how do ye know that?"

"Because." Returning to the mirror, she used her pinky finger to dab a tiny bit of beeswax colored with crushed rose petals across her lips. "He's going to think I'm somewhere else."

THERE WAS ONLY one way to walk into St Giles.

With confidence.

A swagger in his stride and a hand on the pistol at his hip, Grant sauntered bold-as-you-please up High Street, the main thoroughfare that ran straight down the middle of London's most treacherous rookery. It was the middle of the afternoon and the morning rains had finally abated, leaving behind a cloudy, nondescript gray sky. Such was spring in England; an unpleasant mix of wet and fog with the occasional glimmer of sunlight.

If he were in Berkley Square the streets would have been bustling with activity. Merchants selling their wares. Ladies out for their daily constitutionals. Flustered nannies chasing after energetic children. But in St Giles it was eerily quiet, and save for the occasional drunk sprawled on a stoop, passerby were few and far between.

He caught more than one shutter being snapped closed as he strolled along High Street, and knew that word had already gotten out that a runner was patrolling the rookeries. Which most likely explained St Giles' ghostlike appearance. Well, that and the fact that in this part of London the days were for sleeping off the sins of the night before.

Here the streets were not paved in gold but in shite, but horse and human. All matter of refuse littered the ground, from broken gin bottles to slop buckets. The tenements were so close together it was difficult to tell one from the next, and they were in such poor condition it was a wonder they remained standing.

It was hard for him to imagine Juliet living in such a place. Harder

still for him to know that she'd grown up here. Was it any wonder she'd turned to a life of crime? As she herself had said, there were limited options for a woman living in such abject poverty. And surely it was better for her to be a thief than a whore. At the mere thought of her being forced to service strangers who only saw her as a piece of flesh his jaw clenched and his hands curled into fists. He would never wish such a life upon any woman, but particularly not Juliet. She was too proud. Too wild. Too untamed. Being forced into prostitution would kill her spirit as surely as it would eventually kill her body.

And what do you think imprisonment will do? An unwanted voice whispered in the back of his mind. She might be strong for a week, a month, mayhap even a year. But eventually that proud spirit of hers will crack, and then it will crumble, and then it will shatter.

What happened to Juliet after he turned her over to the higher authorities was outside of his control. The magistrate was a hard but fair man. He would see her duly punished, but not excessively so. After three years, maybe two with good behavior, she would be released.

Unless he decided to make an example of her.

Juliet had stolen from some of the *ton's* most powerful and influential members. They would not be satisfied with an inconsequential prison sentence. More than a few might even call for her execution.

The air inside of Grant's lungs turned cold as he imagined her standing atop the gallows, her hands bound behind her back and her green eyes bright with defiance. He knew that whatever happened to

her would be justice as described under English law, and he'd never concerned himself with the fate of criminals before. But then he'd never encountered a criminal quite like Juliet.

Whether he liked it or not, whether he admitted it or not, he *did* care what happened to her. He cared very deeply. But how could he reconcile his personal feelings with his sworn duty to crown and country? Unlike Felix, he wasn't a man who danced around the edges of the law. He *was* the law.

Or at least he had been before a red-haired hellion turned his life upside down.

"Lookin' fer someone, lovie?" A buxom brunette scantily clad in a silk dressing robe appeared in a narrow doorway and sauntered slowly down the steps, ample hips swaying with every stride. "For a pretty price I can be anyone ye fancy," she purred, pressing herself against Grant like a cat in heat. "A high flyin' duchess. A virgin milkmaid. A—"

"That won't be necessary," he said firmly, catching her wrist just in time to stop her from groping his bollocks. "Although I am looking for someone. A thief."

With a long, exaggerated sigh the whore crossed her arms and sat back on her heels. "Thieves are a dime a dozen here, lovie."

"Not female thieves with red hair and green eyes." He studied the brunette's countenance carefully, searching for a glimmer of recognition. An anonymous note received early this morning had said the jewel thief The Wolf was hunting had recently been spotted in St Giles trying to sell a necklace. One that, coincidentally enough,

matched the description of the necklace that had gone missing from Lady Ashburn's bedchamber.

While Grant had reason to doubt the note's authenticity, it was the only lead he had. Tracking down Bran had proved as impossible as finding Juliet, and Felix, turncoat bastard that he was, had refused to give him any more information. Although to be fair he'd been rather busy as of late after the woman he was courting, Miss Felicity Atwood, had been kidnapped by her ex-husband.

She'd since been safely recovered and the two were due to be married this very afternoon in the same church where Owen and his wife had said their vows. Every runner was expected to attend. Grant should have been getting ready, but the possibility of finding Juliet had taken precedence.

"I might've seen someone like that." The brunette pursed her lips. "But I can't seem to remember..."

"Does this jog your memory?" he said dryly, pulling a pouch out of his jacket and giving it a small shake. The coins inside jingled merrily, and the prostitute all but licked her voluptuous lips.

"Ye know, I think it just might." She held out her palm. Wiggled her fingers. After a moment's hesitation Grant gave her the pouch, and the ten shillings contained within.

"Well?" he said as she dumped the shillings into her hand and counted them with the feverish excitement of a squirrel counting acorns. "Have you seen her or not?"

"I've seen 'er all right." She tossed back her head. "She walked right past here no more 'n ten minutes ago. Lookin' pleased as piss, Jules

was. Must've had a good take to turn in."

Ten minutes.

He was only ten minutes behind her.

"Where was she going?" he asked tersely.

The brunette tapped the side of her cheek. "Let me see if I can remember..."

"Here's another ten shillings." Emptying his pockets, he all but threw the money at her. "And there's five more pounds in it for you if she is where you say she is."

"Ginny's Antiquities on the corner of Fleet and West Broad. If she ain't sold 'er piece yet, that's where she'll be. Oy!" the whore called out when he turned and started to walk briskly away. "How will ye find me again?"

Irritation rippling through him at the delay, Grant nevertheless stopped short. "What's your name?"

"Samantha. But all me friends call me Sam." For some reason she found that highly amusing, for her lips pulled back and she let out a peal of laughter. "Good luck, runner." She waited until Grant was out earshot to mutter under her breath, "You're going to bloody well need it."

WHILE GRANT WAS TEARING St Giles apart, Juliet was having a splendid time drinking tea and dining on crumpets drizzled in the sweetest honey she'd ever tasted. It melted on her tongue and she made certain to wrap up several of the crumpets in a silk napkin to save for Sam. Her friend had a dire sweet tooth, and even though she

had refused payment for helping to send Grant on a merry goose chase, Juliet knew she would appreciate the crumpets nevertheless.

Beneath the large white tents that had been erected in the middle of the Countess of Swarthmore's extensive rose gardens, women dressed in pastel gowns and bonnets adorned with flowers gossiped and giggled while servants milled about carrying large silver trays filled with all manner of sugary delicacies. Juliet had eaten so much she had a stomach ache. To her mind it was a small price to pay.

She'd been at the garden soiree for less than two hours, but she had used every minute of time to her advantage. Getting in hadn't been nearly as difficult as Bran had feared. As it turned out, a contingent of American heiresses were in attendance, and everyone simply assumed she was with them. Once she was inside she'd made quick work of charming the Dowager Duchess of Glastonbury.

From her aristocratic bearing and piercing blue eyes, it became readily apparent that the dowager did not suffer fools lightly, and so Juliet had done what she never did at events such as these: she acted like herself.

Much the amazement of the dowager's devoted lady's maid, a tiny whip of a thing who had the bulging eyes of a terrified rabbit, Juliet's wry observations of the other guests soon had the dowager in stitches of laughter. When she'd noted that their hostess resembled a flamingo in her bright pink wrap and black hat, the elderly woman had nearly tipped out of her chair.

"You're very fresh," the dowager said as she snapped at her maid to hand over one of the last remaining invitations from a heavy wicker

basket the poor thing had been carrying around since the soiree began. "I like young ladies who speak their mind. Not enough of them left, in my opinion. You will attend my ball on the third."

It was more of a direct order than a question, but one Juliet was only too happy to accept.

"What do we have, if not our opinions?" She saw more than one head swivel and turn green with envy as she graciously accepted the heavy envelope with a ladylike curtsy and tucked it away inside of her reticule.

There, she thought with a triumphant grin she expertly hid behind a coy little smile. *That was bloody easy.*

"I would be honored to attend your ball, Your Grace."

"Of course you would," the dowager said with a sniff. "It's *the* event of the Season, you know."

"So I have heard," Juliet murmured politely.

"Do you like jewelry?" Those crafty blue eyes zeroed in on her pearl necklace. "I can see you have excellent taste. Too often the jewelry wears the woman instead of the other way around. I'll have several pearl pieces on display. Including a bouton pearl and amethyst bracelet that would suit you splendidly. You have small wrists," the dowager said with an approving nod. "A true mark of a lady."

"Thank you, Your Grace. You are very kind."

The dowager snorted. "I'm many things, but kind isn't one of them."

"You're right," Juliet said easily. "You're not very kind at all. Were this a medieval tale you would be the dragon breathing fire at the gate instead of the fair princess locked away in a tower."

The maid gasped. The dowager's mouth pinched. Just as Juliet was beginning to wonder if she'd taken things a bit too far, the old woman's face stretched into a broad smile and she chortled so loudly that a passing servant nearly dropped his tray.

"Go on then," she said, gesturing Juliet away with a broad sweep of her arm as she dabbed at her eyes with a silk handkerchief. "Go enjoy yourself before you send me into an apoplectic fit. I have decided I am going to die after my auction, not before, and an impertinent chit is not going to change that."

Impertinent chit. Juliet rather liked that.

"As you wish, Your Grace." After another curtsy she stepped back into the crowd, deciding that she'd just about overstayed her welcome. But on her way out of the garden she was stopped by a petite blonde who looked to be in her early fifties. The woman was very pretty for her age, and despite the smile lines at the edges of her mouth and the delicate webbing in the corners of her gray eyes, she exuded a bright, youthful energy. There was something vaguely familiar about her, although Juliet was almost certain they'd never met before.

"The Dowager Duchess seems quite taken with you," she said in a conspiratorial whisper. "I've known Dorothea for nearly a decade, and I've never heard her laugh, let alone laugh so hard she nearly fell out of her chair! Well done, Lady..."

"Miss Williams." The surname was so common that people often had a hard time remembering it, which was why Juliet used it more often than not.

“Miss Williams,” the older woman said warmly. “What a pleasure to meet you. I am Caroline Hargrave.” Seeing the flicker of shock on Juliet’s face, Caroline sighed and said, “Please, you do not have to call me—”

“Your Grace.” Immediately Juliet executed a curtsy, this one far deeper than the one she’d given the dowager. She did not do so out of respect, but rather to give herself a few precious seconds to gather her thoughts and composure. Oh, blast it all! Of all the women in attendance, why did her path have to cross with Grant’s *mother*?

To look at the Duchess of Readington one would not think her old enough – or hearty enough – to have given birth to The Wolf. Her husband must have been enormous, for Grant certainly hadn’t inherited his commanding stature from this tiny slip of a woman. Although he did have her stubborn chin and prominent cheekbones. There were other similarities as well, but Juliet did her best to ignore them as she straightened and plastered a smile on her face.

“What an honor to make your acquaintance, Your Grace.”

“You really don’t have to call me that,” Caroline said with a pained grimace. “After being married to my husband for nearly thirty years you would think I’d be used to it by now, but every time I hear those two words all I can think is how ostentatious they must sound. But enough about me. Please, tell me about yourself. Are you new to London, Miss Williams?”

“I suppose you could say that,” said Juliet, delivering the same vague answer she’d given to the dowager and anyone else who had bothered to ask. “This is my first Season.”

“Oh, how splendid for you!” Clapping her gloved hands together, Caroline beamed over her fingertips. “I still remember my debut as if it were yesterday. Of course, the dresses were a little different back then. That green looks positively divine with your hair.”

“Thank you. If you would excuse me—”

“A beautiful young woman such as yourself must have been inundated with offers for marriage,” the duchess continued. “Are congratulations in order?”

“No,” Juliet said with an evasive shake of her head. “I’m afraid I—”

“That’s too bad,” Caroline interrupted, although the happy chirp in her voice and the mischievous light in her misty gray eyes revealed she really didn’t think it was bad at all. “You know, if you do not have plans for the end of the Season you simply *must* be our guest at Litchfield Park. We’re having a lovely little house party.”

Were Caroline Hargrave anyone else but the Duchess of Readington, Juliet might have actually considered it. Three years ago she and Bran had masqueraded as the son and daughter of a deceased viscount in order to attend a large house party in Bath. While she’d been reluctant to spend a fortnight surrounded by pompous gentility, it had been a surprisingly enjoyable – and lucrative – two weeks. But this particular event was absolutely out of the question.

She could picture it now. Arriving at Grant’s ancestral home in a fancy carriage. Descending in a swirl of delicate muslin. And being slapped in irons on the front lawn while everyone looked on in horror.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I just could not impose.”

“My dear Miss Williams, you would not be an imposition at all!”

Caroline protested. "The truth of the matter is the same people have been attending for what seems like ages, and the company has begun to grow a bit stale. A new face would freshen things up. Naturally your parents would be welcome as well. There is more than enough room--"

"My parents are dead," Juliet interrupted.

"Oh." Only looking slightly taken aback, Caroline managed to quickly recover with the tactful grace of a true lady. "I am sorry to hear that. I lost my father at a young age, and still miss him to this day. Do you have relatives? Or a guardian?"

"A brother. Bran. Although he's not very keen on social gatherings, I am afraid."

"That's only because he's never attended one of mine," Caroline said with the utmost confidence. "Do say you'll come. I can promise that you and your brother will both have a delightful time. And if you don't, well, you are free to leave at any time of course." Her mouth curved in a coaxing smile. "What do you say?"

Bugger it, Juliet thought silently. What was the harm in agreeing to go? One more lie wouldn't hurt anything.

"We would be honored to be your guests."

"Splendid!" Caroline cried with so much enthusiasm that a trio of women stopped in their tracks and looked inquisitively in their direction. "Positively splendid! Oh, I couldn't be more pleased."

"Nor could I." Startled to hear a ring of truth in her voice, Juliet's gaze darted to the large gate behind the duchess. "Your Grace, I hate to seem rude, but I fear I have another social engagement directly

after this one and if I do not leave immediately I will be very late. If you would excuse me...”

“Of course, Miss Williams. I am sorry for detaining you.” Caroline started to move to the side, but then without any warning she drew Juliet into an impulsive hug that seemed to catch both women equally off guard.

“Oh dear,” Caroline said with a laugh as she lifted her arms and stepped back. “I’m not usually so forward, but I have the most unusual feeling you and I are going to be the closest of friends. I look forward to spending more time with you, Miss Williams.”

“The same to you, Your Grace.” In her eagerness to escape Juliet lunged for the gate, belatedly remembered who she was supposed to be, and dropped into an awkward curtsy that nearly had her tripping over the hem of her dress. Righting herself, she flashed Caroline a quick smile before dashing out of the garden as fast as she could without drawing any unwanted attention.

As she slipped between two carriages and struck out across the tree-lined street, it occurred to her this wasn’t the first time she’d run from a Hargrave....nor, she feared, would it be the last.

CHAPTER TWENTY

FATE WAS A temperamental beast. She seemed to work without rhyme or reason, changing lives in the blink of an eye without regard for whether they were saved or ruined. Some swore by her, others damned her. Those predisposed to logic did not believe in her at all.

Juliet knew that fate existed. How else could she explain meeting Yeti, and Bran, and Eddy? Without them, her life would have irrevocably different. Maybe better, but most likely worse. She'd known fate was on her side the first time she had managed to escape from Grant. It had been with her again at the Dashwood's ball, and once more at Blackfriars Bridge.

Truth be told, fate had favored her so many times she'd forgotten how fickle the bitch could be...until she stepped across the street without bothering to look and slammed straight into the hard, immovable body of Lord Grant Hargrave.

"I am terribly sorry, my lady." His deep, husky voice struck a chord of remembrance within her as his hands shot out and steadied her by the shoulders. "I fear I did not see – *Juliet*."

She caught a glimpse of startled green eyes before she managed to slip free of his grasp and darted around a carriage. A plain looking

brougham, it was pulled by a shiny chestnut gelding moving at a leisurely trot. Grabbing onto the door handle, she managed to twist it open and used the folding step to shove herself inside. The carriage's occupants – two women in feather plumed hats – released high pitched screams as she tumbled across their laps.

“Sorry! So sorry!” Rolling onto the floor, she sat up and caught the swinging door, slamming it closed and twisting the lock just as Grant's furious countenance appeared in the window. He slammed his fist against the door and the women screamed again, causing Juliet to wince and cover her ears.

“Excuse me!” she yelled. “Could you please desist? I don't want to go deaf.”

Eyes wide, they both stopped at once and she sighed with relief.

“There.” Leaning back on her hands, she smiled up at them. “That's better. Now. Do you see that angry looking man running alongside your carriage trying to get in?”

“Yes,” the woman on the left, a round-faced blonde, said tentatively.

“That is my ex-fiancé. Very nasty fellow. I'm afraid I had to end our engagement after I discovered he'd spent all of his money at a brothel and gambled away the family estate. As you can tell, he's also the violent sort.”

As if on cue, Grant struck the side of the carriage again and shouted something indecipherable. Juliet lifted a brow as if to say, ‘do you see what I mean?’ and the two women immediately nodded.

“How awful,” the blonde whispered.

“Just ghastly,” her companion, a pretty brunette with big blue eyes, agreed.

“Indeed. Unfortunately, I’m in a bit of tight spot.” *To put it mildly.* “Would you ladies be ever so kind as to make the tiniest of detours?”

“Of course,” said the blonde at once. “Anything we can do. Where do you need to go?”

“Nowhere very far. Just the edge of St Giles.”

“St – St Giles?” The two women exchanged an uneasy glance.

“Yes.” Juliet smiled brightly. “And if you could tell your driver to pick up the pace a bit, that would be lovely.”

DAMNIT!

Unable to keep up with the carriage on foot, Grant seethed in silent anger as it rolled briskly away. Juliet had slipped through his fingers *again*. The woman was as wiggly as an eel with the nine lives of a bloody cat. At least this time he had a good idea where she was going and a fancy carriage like that would stick out like a sore thumb in the East End, giving him a better chance at tracking her down.

Twenty minutes and two hackneys later (the first had refused to get within three blocks of the rookeries, forcing him to flag down another), and that was precisely what he had managed to do. Through sheer dumb luck and a bit of patience, he’d picked up Juliet’s trail outside an abandoned tenement building in the middle of St Giles.

The stairs creaked ominously beneath his weight as he sprinted up them to the highest floor. A board splintered beneath his foot when he ran down the hall, falling away into nothingness. Having been

scorched by fire, the building wasn't sound. There was no telling how long it would hold, but if he went down with it then so would Juliet, for he wasn't letting her go.

Not this time.

Faced with a door to his left and a door to his right, he was forced to make a decision. One door pointed at the street and the other at the alley. If he picked incorrectly, Juliet would be gone and there'd be no telling when she would surface again. His gut told him to go left.

He went right.

Juliet was perched on the windowsill when he slammed open the door. She glanced back at him over her shoulder, and her mouth curled in a sneer.

"You're too late, runner."

She pushed herself quickly off the sill, but Grant was quicker. Throwing himself forward, he managed to catch the hood of her cloak. He yanked. Hard. She fell backwards into him, and the force of their two bodies colliding sent them both sprawling onto the floor in a cloud of dust.

Coughing, Juliet tried to flip herself upright and make a run for the door, but he swept out his leg and struck her behind the knees. He threw himself over her, thighs straddling her waist as he pinned her wrists together above her head in an iron grip. Hair the color of sunset flew in every direction as she tried to twist and buck, but try as she might she couldn't throw him off.

Chest heaving with the force of her exertion, she glared up at him out of flashing green eyes and snapped her teeth, a fierce little wolf

with her paw in a trap. Grant just grinned.

“Caught you,” he said smugly, his face inches from hers. Nine long months he’d been waiting for this moment, and now that it was finally here...all he wanted to do was kiss her.

So he did.

She hissed in outrage when his tongue swept into the hot, sweet cavern of her mouth. He waited for her to retaliate - a bloody lip was no less than he deserved for his bold advances - but instead of biting she moaned, and the tiny sound of surrender was his undoing.

How he’d longed to taste her again! To breathe in her delicate feminine scent and feel her lush curves pressed against him. It was all he’d thought about. All he’d dreamed out. Taking her mouth with a bruising passion that left them both gasping, he poured all of his considerable lust and frustration into the kiss. She bucked her hips again, but this time she wasn’t trying to get away and it was his turn to groan when she slipped her hand between them and stroked his swollen cock.

Releasing her wrists he tangled his hands in her hair, ruthlessly destroying what remained of her coiffure. They rolled once, twice across the dusty floor and she ended up beneath him once again, her nails biting into his shoulders.

She cried out when he ran the tip of his tongue along the curve of her ear. Arched her spine when he nibbled a scorching path down the slender line of her neck. Rubbed herself shamelessly against him when he cupped her breasts through her dress and flicked his thumbs across her hard nipples. He yanked impatiently at her bodice, exposing one

breast and immediately taking her rosy nipple into his mouth. He swirled his tongue around the tight little bud, tugging and licking until she yanked down her bodice the rest of the way and desperately pulled his head to her other breast.

So many women tried to hide their desire behind a stoic façade or, worse yet, pretended to have none at all. Juliet had so much desire bundled into her curvy little body she was all but pulsing with it. He tasted it with every deep kiss, every teasing nibble, and every naughty lick.

After spending a considerable amount of time paying tribute to her lovely nipples, he rolled onto his side and took her mouth once again as his fingers began a slow, leisurely descent down towards the apex of her thighs. Her skirts proved a cumbersome barrier, but he could still feel her through them, all fiery heat and pulsing need. On a low, keening gasp pulled her dress up and let her legs fall open. With an approving growl he slipped his hand beneath the waistband of her drawers, fingers toying her damp curls before he stroked a single fingertip down her swollen clit.

She cried out his name, the first time she'd ever called him anything but 'runner', and his cock jerked in response. He deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding in out between her lips in rhythm with the stroking of his finger.

He longed to bury his finger inside of her. To feel her muscles clench and stretch around him as he slid in one finger, then two. But she was so close to coming that it would have been cruel to delay her release for even another second, and so he used her clit to drive her to

a fast, reckless orgasm that left her eyes glassy and her arms limp.

He was tempted to seek his own release. But then he shifted his weight and the floor groaned, a stark reminder of not only where they were, but *who* they were. And it wasn't lovers.

She sat up when he did, her cheeks flush, her hair a wild tangle around her shoulders. Without looking at him she pulled up her bodice, pulled down her skirts. Scoured the dusty floorboards for the pins he'd pulled out and managed to twist her riotous curls into something that vaguely resembled a bun.

"Well," she said, eyeing the iron manacles he'd unclipped from his belt as she'd been tidying herself up. "I don't suppose this is the part where I toss a shilling your way and we bid each other good day."

Shame at having failed in his duty as a runner heated the nape of Grant's neck. He never should have kissed Juliet, let alone made her come. And yet in spite of his failure, he regretted nothing. How could he when every moment had been more glorious than the last?

But he did regret what was to come next.

"Hold out your right hand, Juliet."

Eyeing the manacles as one might a venomous snake, she started to back up, but this time there was nowhere to run. "You cannot be serious!"

"Your right hand," he repeated.

"I won't run. I promise. You don't need those." She looked down at the manacles with obvious loathing. "Truly."

The lie was so blatant he didn't bother to dignify it with a response. Taking her hand when it became clear she wouldn't give it of her own

violation, he carefully snapped the cuff into place before putting the other manacle onto his own wrist. They were now linked together by a short iron chain that was just long enough for them to walk side by side.

Keeping a hand on her elbow, he led her back out into the hallway and down the narrow flight of stairs. To his pleasant surprise she didn't try to fight him but rather walked along docilely, the epitome of a model prisoner.

At least until they reached Bow Street.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SITTING BACK BEHIND a low wrought iron fence with flower boxes in the windows and green shrubs lining the walkway, the narrow three-story brick house certainly didn't *appear* intimidating. Unless one knew what awaited them on the other side of the dark red door.

"Come on," Grant instructed gruffly when Juliet hesitated at the gate, the heels of her delicate kid slippers digging into the pavement. Like a cat about to be thrown into a bucket of water, every muscle in her body coiled taut as she stared up at the house. If she had fur on the back of her neck it would have been standing straight up, and when Grant took hold of her elbow she bared her teeth and hissed at him.

"I can do it myself!" Never let it be said that she turned into a sniveling coward when the cards were turned against her. Drawing her shoulders back and lifting her chin, she sailed up the walkway as if she were a queen ascending her throne.

Grant easily kept pace beside her. He didn't say anything, but she could *feel* his eyes upon her. Mouth curling, she kept her gaze fixed on the front door. She would rather die than admit her body was still

thrumping from the after effects of a pleasure so intense it had all but blinded her. If Grant could pretend they hadn't just been writhing on the ground touching each other's bodies and kissing one another senseless, then by God so could she.

Without any warning the door swung open and a runner stepped out, only to stop short at the sight of his second-in-command leading a small red-haired lass with daggers in her eyes and a sneer on her lips.

"Hargrave," said the runner, a tall, broad-shouldered man with hair the color of wheat and brown eyes that crinkled at the corners. "I thought you were off for the rest of the afternoon."

"I was," Grant said shortly. "Step aside, Colin. I've got a prisoner I need to book."

"A prisoner?" The runner's brows drew inward. "Looks like a lady to me. And a pretty one at that," he said with a wink.

"Thank you, my lord," Juliet purred, her sneer swiftly turning into a sweet smile as she sensed a potential opening. "That's so very kind of you to say."

"Oh, I'm not a lord, my lady." His handsome face turning a dull, mottled red, Colin cupped the back of his neck and grinned bashfully down at her. "Just a common bloke like any other."

"Don't say that!" she protested. "Surely there is nothing common about you. In fact, I believe you're just the sort of man I'm looking for."

"I am?" he said hopefully.

"Yes. You see, I'm afraid there has been a terrible mix up and—"

"That's enough." Rolling his eyes, Grant gave her manacle a

warning tug. It didn't hurt in the slightest, but that didn't stop a few expertly timed crocodile tears from slipping down her cheeks. She usually considering playing the damsel in distress to be beneath her, but like a wolf willing to chew off its own paw to escape a trap, she would do anything – *anything* – to gain her freedom.

“Oh,” she cried, turning her watery gaze towards Grant. “Please stop doing that, sir. I promise I'll behave.”

Colin frowned. “Now see here, Hargrave. Surely there's no need to manhandle the lady. If there's a misunderstanding–”

“The only misunderstanding is how you can be so bloody gullible. She's playing you, you sodding idiot.” Eyes flashing with disgust, Grant unlocked the manacle from his wrist and drew both of Juliet's arms behind her back. Her stomach plummeted when she heard the click of the key in the tiny locking chamber. “It's what she does best. Isn't that right, Juliet?”

“Juliet?” Colin's brows shot up towards his hairline. “You mean *this* is the thief you've been chasing? Well bugger me!” He grinned broadly. “Although I'll be the first to admit she doesn't *look* like much of a thief.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” Grant growled. “If you'd move aside–”

“How did you finally catch her?” Colin interrupted, his curious gaze sweeping from Juliet to Grant and then back to Juliet.

“He didn't catch me.” Juliet gave a haughty toss of her head. “I ran straight into him.”

Colin's brow creased. “Why'd you go and do that?”

“The hell if I know,” she snapped. Now that it was apparent Colin

would be of no use to her, her patience for small talk was rapidly dwindling. “Are you going to take me inside?” she asked Grant. “Or should we send for tea and crumpets?”

“Come on.” Grabbing her arm just above the elbow, Grant proceeded to steer her up the front steps and through the door. Colin jumped quickly out of the way, allowing them to pass by unhindered, and she caught a quick glimpse of a sunny foyer and a room with a long rectangular table piled high with papers before she was forced up more stairs and down a narrow hallway. Pulling a long black key out of the pocket of his waistcoat, Grant used it to open the third door on the right and pushed her inside.

She tripped on a raised floorboard, and without her arms to rebalance herself would have fallen flat on her face had Grant not grabbed her by the waist. Her head fell back against his chest, her elbows splaying out to the side. She let out a startled gasp when her bottom pressed against his powerful thighs. Even through their layers of clothing she could feel the heat of him, as well as the hardness. They fit together like two puzzle pieces clicking into place, and despite the cold prison cell that awaited she could no more stop her need for him than she could stop her next heartbeat.

She knew in her head Grant was everything that was wrong. He was a runner. A lord. Her sworn *enemy*. But having tasted the dark, seductive nectar of desire more than once, she could not help but crave it again.

Yes, he was wrong. In every way a man could be wrong for a woman. But this...this *fire* between them felt so incredibly right that if

it were humanly possible she would have gladly stayed wrapped in his arms for all of eternity.

Daring to test waters that were probably best left untouched, she brushed her hands ever so lightly against the granite bulge pressing into her backside. Grant's sharp intake of breath was like the hiss of water hitting a hot surface, and the muscles in her belly tightened with yearning when his hands started to slide down her ribcage inch by deliberate inch. She waited for him to push her away...but instead he closed his fingers around her hips and drew her even more snugly into the hot cavern of his loins.

"You're not wearing a corset." He made it sound like an accusation, as if she had committed some cardinal sin. In his eyes she supposed she had. After all, a lady would never dare be caught without the proper undergarments. Then again, she wasn't a proper lady.

"You didn't realize that before?" she asked, coyly bringing her chin to her shoulder and peering up at him beneath thick auburn lashes. He met her stare fiercely, his glittering gaze filled with a lust so potent it made her knees tremble.

Fire, she warned herself dazedly. *You're playing with fire, Juliet.*

And heaven help her, but how she wanted to burn.

"That was a mistake," he said tersely.

"Why?" It was a challenge, not a question. Keeping her gaze locked on his she touched him again, fingers tracing the rigid outline of his cock through the rough fabric of his trousers. Only by the slightest widening of her eyes did she register her amazement at how *large* he was. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, but the man was hung like a bloody

horse! She should have been intimidated...and part of her was. But the other part, the part that would have flung her arms around his neck and dragged his mouth back down to hers if she wasn't shackled, wanted him all the more.

"Why?" His eyebrows arched incredulously. "I'd count the reasons, but we'd be here all night. Suffice it to say you're my prisoner, and it would be immoral."

She wet her bottom lip with a delicate swipe of her tongue. Watched his pupils dilate and darken. Felt his muscles draw and tighten.

"Immorality didn't stop you a few minutes ago," she whispered.

He cursed viciously under his breath, then lifted his hand to her jaw, the pad of his thumb gently tracing the outline of her mouth. She turned until they were facing one another and the hard line in the middle of his forehead softened as he gazed down at her upturned face.

She shivered when he groaned her name and lifted her chin when his heavy stare dropped to her mouth. Anticipating another drugging kiss, she started to close her eyes...and jumped like a scalded cat when a loud knock sounded at the door.

"Hargrave, are you in there?" It was Colin, the runner from downstairs, and Juliet silently damned him straight to hell for his piss poor timing.

"Ignore it," she said desperately, but one glance at Grant's guarded expression and she knew she had already lost him. Whatever softness she'd managed to coax forth was gone. In the blink of an eye – or in

this case, a knock on the door – they were back to what they’d always been: a thief and runner. Had she really imagined they could ever be anything else?

“Hargrave!” The knocking turned to pounding as Colin raised his voice. “We need you downstairs at once.”

“Be there in a bloody minute!” Grant snapped over his shoulder before he refocused his attention on Juliet. He released her and stepped back, his countenance unreadable save a tightness in the corners of his mouth that was rapidly spreading to the rest of his face. A tense silence stretched between them, as long as the shadows that were beginning to creep down the empty plaster walls.

“Where have you been?” he said suddenly. She could tell it wasn’t what he’d wanted to say by the quick flash of annoyance in his gaze, but he didn’t try to retract the words. “I searched everywhere.” His brow furrowed. “I feared you might be dead.”

A quick, delighted smile flitted across her lips as a small flame of hope ignited inside of her chest. With the exception of Bran and Yeti, no one had ever concerned themselves with her well-being before. Maybe Grant really *did* care for her after all. And if he did, then surely he wouldn’t go through with turning her over to the magistrate. Not that she’d ever really believed he would. How could he, after everything they’d shared? First at the ball and then on the bridge and then in a falling down tenement. True, they’d been at odds for all of those times and yes, she’d threatened to shoot him more than once... but what relationship wasn’t without its complications?

Grant chased her, she tried to stab or shoot him, they kissed, and

then she ran away. It was what they *did*. What they would continue to do, once he came to his sense and got rid of these bloody manacles. Speaking of which...

“Do you mind?” she said, giving the heavy cuffs a rattle. “I’m all for a flashy bracelet, but these really aren’t my style.”

He looked at her oddly. “I’m not letting you go, Juliet.”

“Because of our bet? I’ll admit I don’t have the ten pounds on me, but I’m good for them. Never let it be said I’m not a thief of her – you’re serious,” she whispered when she looked up and saw the grim set of his mouth and the resigned determination in his eyes. “You’re – you’re really not going to release me?”

“No.”

The fragile hope that had flared so briefly to life sputtered and crumbled to ash, leaving her with an empty feeling in the pit of her stomach and the first genuine stirring of fear. “But – but I’ll be thrown in prison. For *years*.” The color leached from her cheeks, leaving them pale as parchment. Her mouth trembled. “They might even hang me.”

“I won’t let that happen,” he said sternly before he stepped forward and gently lifted her chin, meeting her panicked gaze with his solemn one. “I promise.”

“You promise...” she said faintly. “I don’t understand. I thought there was something between us—”

“I still have to do my job, Juliet. I am a runner, first and foremost.” His Adam’s apple jerked in his throat, the only sign that he wasn’t nearly composed as he was pretending to be. “You knew the risk when you committed those crimes. You knew what might happen.”

“Yes,” she cried, “but I never thought...”

“You never thought?” he prompted when she trailed off.

“I never thought I’d be *caught*.” Jerking free of his grasp, she stumbled back until she hit the wall. “I don’t hurt anyone. You know I don’t.”

“You’re still breaking the law,” he said quietly.

“Bugger the law, and bugger you!” As anger began to eclipse her fear, she gathered as much of the hot, burning emotion as she could and used it to defend her bleeding heart. “You may be a runner, but you still have the power to do what’s right.”

His jaw clenched. “I *am* doing what’s right.”

“If you really believe that, then I have nothing else to say to you.”

“Juliet—”

“Go,” she said, turning her head to the side. “You’re needed downstairs.”

“I want to explain—”

“Explain what?” she demanded, her eyes widening as she looked back at him. “Explain how you can kiss me senseless one moment and toss me in irons the next? I thought you were different. I thought...” She shook her head, a bitter laugh forcing itself between her lips. “But it doesn’t matter *what* I thought, does it?”

“This was only ever going to end one way, Juliet. Surely you must have known that.” He held her damning stare for a second longer, then muttered something unintelligible and left the room, taking care to lock the door behind him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“WHAT IS IT?” Grant growled as he stormed down the stairs and into the front room where all of the runners except for Felix had gathered. While he’d been chasing Juliet around St Giles, his arch-nemesis had been getting married. By the looks of their formal attire, everyone had attended the ceremony except for him. “What the devil couldn’t wait a bloody second longer? I was questioning a prisoner.”

“A woman claims to have seen a man matching The Slasher’s description one hour ago in Haversham Square,” Owen said grimly, looking up from a large map he’d spread across the table. “Says he came up to her in the middle of the market and tried to get her to go with him into an empty shop. When she refused, he pulled out a knife.”

“Was she hurt?” Forcibly tearing his mind away from Juliet, Grant gave the captain his full attention. A violent murderer who liked to carve up his victims before murdering them, The Slasher had first appeared in London nearly five years ago. After a killing spree that left more than a dozen women slain, he’d disappeared into thin air. Everyone had hoped that he had died...but six weeks ago when a dead prostitute showed up on Felicity Atwood’s doorstep they came to grim

conclusion that he'd only been in hiding.

Under Owen's strict orders the runners had been canvassing the entire city around the clock ever since, working in a methodical grid like pattern in the hopes of flushing The Slasher out of whatever dark hole he'd slithered back into. Unfortunately, thus far all of their efforts had come to naught. If The Slasher really *had* been sighted in Haversham Square then this was the break in the case they'd all been waiting for.

"No, she wasn't. Thank God. Ian was on a routine patrol nearby and heard her screaming. When she gave him a description of the perpetrator – and mentioned the knife – he immediately suspected The Slasher."

The Slasher was renowned for killing his victims – all women – with a knife. He slit their throats and then went to work on their bodies. The results were nothing short of gruesome, and the first time Grant had seen one of the mutilated bodies firsthand he'd thrown up his dinner on the spot.

"Have we sent anyone out?" he demanded.

"I'm about to." Grabbing a pencil, Owen drew three large squares on the map and wrote in their names as he spoke them out loud. "I want you, Hawke, and Ian to tear the entire square apart. Start in the middle, here, and work your way out. Chances are he's already moved on, but he could also be laying low, waiting for the threat to pass. If you manage to flush him out, Archer and Colin are going to be waiting here, at the intersection of Newbury and Yates. They'll be stopping and searching every carriage that goes past."

“What about me?” Tobias Kent, a dark-haired Irishman with a thick brogue and a dark temper, had a very personal reason for catching The Slasher. His wife had been one of the bastard’s first victims.

“You’re with me,” Owen said. “We’ll head directly to Fleet Ditch. If The Slasher has left the square, that’s where he’ll most likely be. Any questions?”

To a man, every runner shook their head.

“Good. We’ll meet back here at midnight.”

Everyone scraped their chairs back and stood up in unison. Grant was the first out the door. Slightly out of breath, Ian and Hawke caught him just as he reached the end of the street. Lifting his arm, he flagged down a hackney. Given the time of day one stopped almost immediately, and after giving the driver terse orders to get to Haversham Square as fast as possible, they all piled in.

As he stared tersely out the soot covered window, Grant found his thoughts returning to Juliet. It was a dangerous thing, for a runner’s mind to be on something else when he was on a case. Particularly one as important as this. But putting Juliet completely out of his head was impossible. So was forgetting the way she had looked at him when she’d realized he was going to keep her in chains.

The pain and betrayal in her eyes...it had hit him like a punch to the gut, and it had taken everything inside of him not to go to her and gather her up in her arms. To kiss her soft lips and comb his fingers through her hair and reassure her that everything was going to be all right, that she *wasn’t* going to have to stand before the magistrate, that he was going to keep her safe...

But he'd done none of those things because he was a runner and it was his job – his sworn *duty* – to help the innocent and apprehend the guilty. With the exception of his family, nothing was more important to him. But if that was completely true, why couldn't he get Juliet's voice out of his head?

I thought you were different...

His teeth grinded together as the hackney made a sharp left and headed towards Haversham Square at a breakneck pace. The bloody truth of the matter was that he *did* feel different when he was around her. For all of Juliet's faults, the greatest one was her ability to make him forget.

When he was touching her – hell, when he was within ten feet of her – everything else faded away and he wasn't a runner or a lord. He was just a man and she was just a woman and together...together they felt *right*. He couldn't think of any other way to explain it.

So what the devil was he going to do about it?

He couldn't let her go. Not if he wanted to continue being a runner. If Owen didn't discover what he'd done and fire him outright, his damned conscious would make him quit. And then what the devil would he do? Retire to the country and succumb to a paralyzing case of ennui? His entire life was defined by Bow Street. It was the very air he breathed. But he also didn't know if he had it in him to turn Juliet over to the magistrate, despite what he'd said. The idea of her locked away in Newgate chilled him to the bone. She may have been a thief, but she didn't belong in that hellhole.

Only the damned did.

IT TOOK JULIET exactly five minutes and thirty-seven seconds to pick her way out of the cuffs and unlock the door. A personal best. Rubbing her wrists where the heavy manacles had chafed the delicate skin, she slowly opened the door a few scant inches and peered down the hallway. It was empty, with nary a single runner in sight.

Taking a deep breath, she slipped out of the holding room and tiptoed along the edge of the wall, careful to avoid any boards that looked as though they might creak beneath her weight, slight as it was. At the top of the stairs she stopped and listened, but there was only silence. Lifting up her skirts she flitted down the steps like a shadow and headed straight for the front door. It almost seemed too easy to be true, but she'd never been the sort to look a gift horse in the mouth and she wasn't about to start now. All of the runners must have been called away on a case, which was why Grant had left her so abruptly.

At the mere thought of his name her stomach knotted and her hands curled into fists, nails digging into the soft flesh of her palms. How *stupid* she'd been, to ever believe there was something between them! To ever hope – even for a moment – that she meant something to him. To ever think that when their backs were pressed against the wall he would choose her over Bow Street. That he would choose their physical attraction over duty. Their kisses over honor. Their connection over his damned morality.

Stupid, she thought bitterly. *You're nothing but a stupid, naïve girl who allowed herself to be fooled by a handsome face.*

Well, she wouldn't be making that mistake again. As far as she was concerned. Grant Hargrave could go straight to hell and if he came after her again she would put him there herself. This was no longer a friendly fight. It was a war.

And there was only going to be one victor.

GRANT MADE IT back to Bow Street at half past two in the morning.

Physically and mentally exhausted from chasing a lead that had ultimately led to nowhere, he gave a cursory nod to the runners that had returned before him and were sharing a bottle of brandy before heading upstairs.

He'd never intended to make Juliet wait for so long, and guilt gnawed at him as he unlocked the door and stepped into the darkened room.

"Juliet, I'm sorry." *For more things than one.* "We had to go to Haversham Square and – Juliet?" He had his first inkling that something wasn't right even before he lit a candle.

The first thing he saw was the iron shackles on the floor and with a muffled curse he sprang forward and picked them up. Metal clanged as he spun around, but even before he shone the light in every corner of the room he knew the truth.

Juliet was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

IT WAS FINALLY HERE. The night Juliet had been waiting for. The night she had been planning for. The night that was going to change her life forever.

The Glastonbury Ball.

It had been four days since she'd managed to escape from Bow Street, and she'd spent every one of them preparing for tonight. The gown she'd chosen to wear was a pale, shimmering gold with a silk underlay and tufted sleeves that sat just off her shoulders. The color accentuated her ivory skin and fiery hair, which – with Sam's help – she'd pinned to the top of her head in an elaborate coiffure and draped with a string of miniature diamonds. Larger diamonds – all stolen, of course – glittered at her ears and on her wrist. She'd left her throat bare, letting the gold-threaded gossamer trim around the scooped neck bodice speak for itself.

As she did a slow turn in front of the mirror, she felt – and looked – like a princess. But her appearance did little to dislodge the dark cloud that had been hanging over her head ever since she'd discovered how

very little she meant to a man who, to her surprise, had somehow come to mean a great deal to her.

When had she begun to think of Grant as more than just a runner? Looking back she couldn't be certain, but she suspected it had started the night of the Dashwood's ball...and grown into something tangible when he'd kissed her senseless in front of Blackfriars Bridge.

But that was over now. Whatever they'd had between them – if, indeed, there had ever been anything at all – was gone. Erased by Grant's determination to follow the law to the bloody letter. There was no doubt in her mind that if not for her escape, she'd be wearing itchy gray flannel instead of smooth gold silk. He would have turned her over to the magistrate without batting an eye...and knowing the decision had been so damn *easy* for him was what hurt the most.

If he'd shown an ounce of compassion, a moment of conflict, even just a *flicker* of doubt...but there had been nothing. Nothing but a damning wall of self-righteousness. One that even all of her charms and her pleas had been unable to breach.

Her bottom lip curled with disgust as she recalled how close she'd come to begging for her life. Tucking a loose auburn curl into place, she stalked across the room and leaned down to yank her satin dance slippers out from underneath the bed. Her movements were jerky, her breaths accelerating as anger flooded over her in a hot, bubbling wave.

“Never again,” she said fiercely, wanting – needing – to hear the words spoken out loud. “No man will ever have that much power over me again.”

No matter how potent his kisses. Or how green his eyes. Or how muscular his—

“Blast and *damn*,” she cursed, driving the thin heel of her slipper into the floor. What would it take to get him out of her head?

“I’m fairly certain that ain’t language befitting’ of a lady,” Bran drawled as he entered her room without bothering to knock. Crossing his arms and kicking his boot against the wall, he leaned back and studied her with a lifted brow. “Although ye do look the part. If I didn’t know any better I’d think there was blue blood runnin’ through those veins o’ yers.”

“What do you want?” she said crossly. “If you’ve come to try to talk me out of this—”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” But his blue eyes were troubled. “I’ve received some news that I think ye should know.”

“Can’t it wait?” Returning to the mirror, she began to apply a light dusting of pink rouge to the apples of her cheeks. “As you can see, I’m rather busy.”

“No, it bloody well can’t.”

Her hand stilled as she met his gaze in the mirror. “Well? What is it?”

“Maybe ye should sit down—”

“Just *tell* me, Bran. It can’t be that bad.” Her eyes widened. “Unless something has happened to Yeti—”

“That old badger?” he snorted. “He’s goin’ to outlive us all. No, this has nothin’ to do with Yeti. Well, I suppose in a way it does...”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Bran.” Exasperation had her rolling her

eyes. “Just spit it out!”

“All right, then. It’s Edward.”

Edward.

At their brother’s name the rouge brush went clattering to the floor as every muscle in her body tensed. Of all the things she had been expecting Bran to say...

“What about him?” she demanded as a cold, hard weight settled over her chest. It had been so long since she’d felt it, she’d almost forgotten what it was.

Dread.

A burst of blazing anger flashed across Bran’s face, but beneath the anger was a deep, dark sorrow. The same aching sorrow Juliet felt in her own heart whenever she thought of the sweet, shy boy they’d called Eddy. The boy who had grown into a man and betrayed them both in the coldest, callous way possible. The boy they had both vowed to never speak of again.

“He’s back in London.”

“You’re lying,” she said flatly.

“Ye know I wouldn’t lie about this.”

No, he wouldn’t. Neither of them would.

“How...?” she whispered, her arms creeping up to wrap around her middle as she rocked back against the vanity table, sending tiny pots of powder and horsehair brushes rolling across the marble surface.

“I don’t think it’s a matter of how, it’s a matter of why,” said Bran, his expression grim.

“But – but he *can’t* be here. I told him–”

“I know what ye bloody well told him. I was there, wasn’t I?”

Yes, he’d been there. And her stomach still did a slow, queasy roll whenever she thought of what might have happened if he hadn’t.

The night they’d banished Edward was not something she had allowed herself to think about in four long years. But now it resurfaced, like a nightmare slipping into a dream.

Eddy had been acting odd for weeks, but she’d not thought anything of it. Not until a noise had woken her in the middle of the night and she’d sat up to discover him standing at the foot of her bed, his expression oddly vacant, his brown eyes glassy.

“Eddy what – what are you doing in here?” Even fully clothed in an oversized nightdress she still remembered pulling the blankets all the way up to her chin, alarmed not only by Eddy’s presence in her room, but by the way he was looking at her. There was an unsettling hunger in his gaze...and when his stare dipped down to her breasts she felt an icy chill crawl across her skin.

“Ye’ve grown up, Jules.” A floorboard creaked beneath his weight as he approached the side of the bed, and the sudden noise made her flinch. “Ye ain’t the same gangly, coltish girl ye used to be.”

“We’ve all grown up,” she said cautiously. “You have a moustache now.” It wasn’t the only physical change that Eddy had undergone over the past six months. How had she not noticed how tall he’d gotten, or how brawny? He seemed to fill the small room with his presence, the muscles above his shoulders twitching as he rolled his head from side to side and grinned down at her, fingers combing over the dark hair covering his upper lip.

“Do ye like it?” he asked.

“Yes,” she lied. “It suits you.”

“*It suits you,*” he repeated in a mocking parody of her lilting voice. The corners of his mouth tightened, and even though his grin remained in place, it grew noticeably colder. “Ye sound like a fancy nabob. Do ye think ye’re better than me, Little Jules? Well?” he demanded, taking another step closer when she only stared at him in wordless astonishment. “Do ye?”

“Where – where is this coming from?” Her hand slipped underneath her pillow to grab the knife she always kept there. The knife she was prepared to use against an intruder...but one she’d never imagined using against a friend. *No, not a friend*, she corrected herself silently. *A brother.*

Eddy was her brother every bit as much as Bran, although she’d be the first to admit that she and Bran were closer. In a group of three it seemed only natural that two would bond more tightly than one, but she’d never thought of Eddy as any less important. Different, perhaps. Especially lately.

He’d been spending his days at the whorehouses and his nights raising hell on Fleet Ditch, leaving her and Bran to canvas Berkley Square by themselves. After a string of successful robberies they were planning on moving into Grosvenor Square and they’d wanted to invite Eddy to join them, but his behavior had been so erratic as of late that they’d been having second thoughts. Impulsiveness and recklessness had no place in a heist, two characteristics which their brother now seemed to have in spades.

Eddy took another step closer, and her nose wrinkled when she caught a whiff of the gin on his breath.

“You’re foxed,” she accused. “*Again*. Go sleep it off, Eddy, and we can talk tomorrow when you wake up.”

“Ye don’t get to tell me what to do.” A sliver of moonlight spilled across his face as he advanced even closer, revealing mottled red cheeks and hard, flinty eyes that Juliet did not recognize. Her fingers tightened around the knife.

“Eddy, stop. This isn’t you–”

“Ye think ye’re so much better.” He cleaned in close and she gagged when his foul breath wafted across her face. Scrambling to the furthest edge of the bed she started to swing her legs over the side, but despite his inebriated state Eddy moved with surprising quickness and grabbed her wrist, yanking her back.

“Where do ye think ye’re goin’?” he growled. “It’s time ye learned yer rightful place with all the other whores – *argh!*” With a cry and a curse he jumped back, releasing her wrist to grab his left cheek where her the tip of her blade had left a jagged red line in his flesh.

Unable to believe she’d been forced to defend herself against someone she considered family, someone she had grown up, someone she thought she knew better than she knew herself, Juliet sprang off the mattress and whirled around, the knife still clenched in her hand.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry Eddy, but you made me do it.” Guilt filled her when she saw the blood seeping between his fingers. She hadn’t meant to cut him so deeply. An inch higher and she might have taken his eye. “You need to leave. Please.”

“I ain’t goin’ anywhere.” His eyes gleamed with a dark, malicious light. “And neither are ye.”

Without warning he lunged across the bed and managed to knock the knife out of her hand. It went skittering across the floor, lost to the shadows as they grappled in the moonlight. She managed to strike him once with her elbow and tried to bring her knee up between his legs, but he brought back his hand and slapped her with so much force that her ears rang and dots of light danced in front of her eyes.

Taking advantage of her temporary paralysis he picked her up and tossed her onto the bed. With a desperate cry she tried to roll away, but this time he was quicker. Grabbing a fistful of her hair he yanked her back and threw his body over top of her, his knees pinning her legs and his hand holding her wrists above her head.

Dizzy from the pain and the shock, Juliet could only stare up at him in mute horror, her green eyes glassy with fear and revulsion. Her stomach rolled when he ran his tongue across his bottom lip, his expression gloating as he leered down at her.

“Not so special now, are ye?” he sneered. “This is where ye belong. On yer back. Like all the other whores. If not for ye *I’d* be the best. And when I’m through with ye I will be. I’ll be better than ye. Better than Bran. Better than anyone!”

Jealousy, she realized. *Jealousy is driving his hate.*

How had she not seen it before now? Or maybe she had...but she’d chosen to look the other way, refusing to believe someone she loved could become so bitter and twisted. Gone was the boy she’d known. In his place was a deranged monster she didn’t recognize.

“Maybe I should leave ye a virgin,” he mused as he trailed his hand down her shoulder. Her nightgown had ripped during the fray, and she shivered when his hands touched her bare skin. “Madam Veneer pays a pretty penny for wenches who ‘ave their cherries intact.”

“You mean to sell me to a *whore house*?” And here she’d thought the worst thing he planned to do was rape her, which would have been terrible enough. But to sell her like a slave to Madam Veneer, the owner of one of the worst brothels in all of St Giles...

“You’ve gone mad,” she whispered. “Completely mad.”

Eddy grinned, revealing teeth that were beginning to rot from poor hygiene and too much gin. “That’s were yer wrong, Jules. For the first time I’m finally thinkin’ clear. I should’ve done this months ago, before ye and Bran teamed up against me.”

“We did no such thing!”

“Didn’t ye?” A shadow rippled across his countenance and he lashed out like a snake, his dirty nails sinking into her skin with so much force he drew blood. She felt it trickle down her collarbone, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of flinching, which seemed to only further incite his rage. “Ye’ve cut me out of yer last four takes!” Spittle flew out of the corners of his mouth and landed on her face. “Did ye think I wouldn’t notice, all the blunt ye’ve been bringing in?”

“We didn’t cut you out of anything!” Some of her fear receded as anger rose to take its place. “You could have gone with us, but you’ve been too busy getting drunk and sleeping with prostitutes!”

His eyes flashed a dark, dangerous black. “Ye were always a bitch.”

“And you were always the worst thief of all of us!”

He raised his arm to strike her and this time she couldn't help but flinch as she anticipated the blow, but it never came. Instead there was a howl of pain, the gut-wrenching sound of a joint popping out of place, and then Eddy was yanked off her.

With a gasp she opened her eyes to discover Bran and Eddy rolling on the floor, pummeling each other with their fists. Grunts and curses filled the air and within a matter of seconds the fight was over before it ever really had a chance to begin. Eddy may have been the larger of the two men, but with one arm dislocated he was no match for Bran. That did not stop Bran from continuing to land blows even after he'd gone limp, and with a soft cry of alarm Juliet sprang off the bed.

"Stop! Bran, stop!" She latched onto his arm with all of her strength when he drew it back to land another punch. "You're going to kill him!"

Her words managed to pierce Bran's red haze of fury. With another vicious curse he rocked back on his heels and then staggered to his feet. He was bleeding from a cut above his right eyebrow, but appeared otherwise unharmed. The same could not be said for Eddy.

If she didn't know who she was looking down at, she never would have recognized him. His nose was broken. His jaw as well. One eye was already swollen shut and the other was filled with blood. Yet he was still clinging to consciousness, and when he noticed her staring at him he somehow managed to curl his mouth in a sneer.

"*Bwitch*," he rasped, glaring at her out of one bloody eye.

"What did ye say?" Bran growled.

Beneath her hand she felt his entire body vibrate as he prepared to

launch himself at Eddy again, and even though she would have been well within her rights to let him, she held fast to his arm. “Bran, that’s enough. He’s not worth it.”

Bran looked at her incredulously. “Do ye know what he would have done to ye Jules, had I not come running in?”

“I know.” A tremor worked its way down her spine as she realized how close she’d come to the unimaginable. “But you stopped him. You stopped him, and he’ll never harm me again.” Her gaze shifted to the defiant pile of bruises and broken bones huddled on the floor. “Will you, Edward?”

It was the first time she’d ever used his full name. To her, he would never be Eddy again. Steeling herself, she crouched down beside him and gently brushed his hair back from his forehead, mourning the boy she’d loved and lost even as she condemned the man he’d turned into.

“Jules—” Bran said warningly, only to fall silent when she delivered a speaking glance over her shoulder.

“You will never harm me again, Edward, because you are going to leave London.” She spoke in a whisper, but she knew he heard her by the way his throat convulsed. “You are going to leave London and you are *never* going to return. Because if you do, I won’t only not stop Bran from killing you, I’ll help him do it. Do you understand?”

Hate burning in his gaze, Edward managed a slow, painful nod.

“Good.” She stood up and brushed off her hands. “You have until tomorrow morning. Now get the fuck out of here.” Even though it was small and petty of her, she couldn’t resist kicking him in the ribs before she turned and faced the wall, unable to watch as he pulled

himself to his feet and staggered out of the room, leaving a trail of blood in his wake.

Bran followed him down the stairs. She managed to keep her tears at bay until she heard the front door slam, and then they poured out of her like a faucet. She continued to cry even when Bran returned and drew her into his arms, gently pressing her head against his chest and rubbing her back in large circles designed to soothe and comfort.

“There now,” he murmured as she trembled and shook and sobbed. “There now. It’s all over, Jules. It’s done. Ye banished the bastard, and he’s never stepping foot in London again. Do ye hear me?”

“I – I never want to hear his name.”

“Ye won’t. Far as I’m concerned, ‘e’s dead to us.”

And for four long years he was...

Until suddenly he wasn’t.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“YOU’RE CERTAIN it’s him?” she said quietly.

“Aye.” Too agitated to remain in one place, Bran began to pace the length of the room. “Do ye know the gang that’s moved in to the docks? The one that’s been robbin’ the merchant ships blind.”

Juliet nodded. She’d heard rumors here and there, but having been a little bit preoccupied she hadn’t given them much attention. Aside from her ill-fated visit to The Lusty Mermaid, she avoided the docks like the plague. There was nothing there for her except drunken sailors and diseased doxies.

“The runners ‘ave been after them for months, but they ‘aven’t been able to catch their kingpin. Calls himself Mallack now. Word ‘as it he’s a right nasty bloke.”

“What does he have to do with Edward?”

Bran met her confused gaze. “Mallack is Edward,” he said grimly.

Juliet’s mouth opened. Closed. She wanted to refute Bran’s statement. To tell him he was mistaken. Confused. But she knew he wasn’t. After all these years, Edward had finally returned to London. Which meant neither she nor Bran would be safe until he was dead.

And here she’d thought Grant Hargrave was her biggest threat.

Compared to the man who had tried to rape her and sell her into prostitution, The Wolf was an angel.

“Have you seen him?” She glanced at the pocket watch she kept on her vanity, gauging how much time she had until the carriage she’d hired to take her to the ball. Despite the startling news of Edward’s return, she still had every intention of going through with her plan. She’d worked too hard and risked too much to abandon it at the twelfth hour.

“Last night, at the Mermaid. He looked older. Meaner. But he still has the scar you gave him.”

“Good.” Her only regret was that she hadn’t cut him deeper. Turning back to the mirror, she opened a small jar of beeswax tinted with beetroot powder and dabbed it on her lips. “What do you think would be easier? A knife or a pistol? A pistol,” she decided matter-of-factly before Bran could reply. “I don’t want to have to get close enough to him to smell his stench. What?” Noting Bran’s expression in the mirror’s reflection, she tilted her head to the side. “You think a knife would be better?”

“Crikey, Jules.” He raked a hand through his hair. “We’re thieves, not murderers.”

“You know what he tried to do to me.” Even though her voice was calm and her words precisely spoken, Juliet could feel her heart galloping away inside of her chest as though she was a thoroughbred racing for the finish line. “What he *would* have done, had you not intervened.”

“Which is why we had him exiled.”

“And now he’s back.” Finished with her face, she crossed to the window and drew back the curtain. A glossy black carriage pulled by a gray horse waited below, signaling it was time to leave. “We told him what would happen if he returned. I only wonder why he hasn’t struck at us first.”

“He’s plannin’ something,” Bran warned. “Ye can be sure of that.”

Yes, she was certain he was. Edward – Mallack – had always held a grudge, even as a young child. She remembered when they’d been sailing paper boats on the Serpentine and she’d lost his. It had been an accident, her hand had slipped off the string, but that hadn’t stopped him from yanking her beloved porcelain doll out of her hands and smashing its head open on a tree. At the time she’d thought his behavior was nothing more than the antics of an unruly boy, but now she realized it had been an indication of something darker yet to come.

“My carriage is here.” She swept a hand down her dress and patted her hair, making sure everything was in its proper place before. “I have to go.”

“Go?” Bran said incredulously, his boots echoing on the steps as he followed her down the stairs. “Ye can’t mean to leave the house after what I jest told ye. It wouldn’t be safe.”

“If Edward has been in London for months and hasn’t done anything yet, what makes you think he’s going to come after me tonight?” Opening the closet, she pulled out an ivory shawl and wrapped it around her shoulders. There were matching satin gloves in her reticule, but as she detested the bloody things she’d wait until the

last possible moment to put them on.

“There’s no telling what that bastard is planning.”

“I’ll be fine.” Stepping up on her toes, she pressed a chaste kiss to his rough cheek. “You don’t have to worry about anything other than how we’re going to spend all my money.” Her eyebrows darted up and down. “Fancy a trip to India? I hear the women are very beautiful. There might even be a few you haven’t bedded yet. Unless you’re saving yourself for Lilly.”

She’d been pleased – but not surprised – when Bran had returned to the house with the blonde-haired barmaid in tow. Despite his roguish nature he had a soft heart, and Lilly wasn’t the first stray he’d brought home. She had stayed with them for nearly a month before he found her a job as a seamstress and a flat to rent. Only Juliet knew that he continued to pay for most of it out of his own pocket every month.

“Sod off,” he muttered. “Lilly is a friend. Nothin’ more.”

“Do you sleep with all of your friends?” she asked innocently.

His eyes narrowed. “How do ye know we slept together?”

“The walls aren’t nearly as thick as you think they are. It’s a shame you let her go. She was much better than that opera singer you carried on with for months. What was her name?”

“Natalia.” He crossed his arms. “And she wasn’t *that* bad.”

“She threatened to burn our house down.”

“I like a wench with spirit.”

“Any more spirit and we would have been roasted alive in our sleep.”

“Don’t ye have somewhere to be?” he scowled.

“Indeed I do.” Before he could realize how neatly she’d distracted him, Juliet hurried out to the waiting carriage. The driver, a friend of Yeti’s, tipped his hat and grinned toothlessly at her as he held open the door.

“Evenin’, Jules. Or should I say Lady Jules? What are ye tonight, a duchess or one of them countess types?”

“Neither. Tonight I’m just Miss Williams, the lowly daughter of a viscount.”

“Well ye look like royalty to me.” He snapped the door shut behind her and leaned in through the open window. The weather was unseasonably warm and the clouds that had been hanging over the city for most of the day had finally receded, revealing a dark sky brilliantly lit with shining stars. “That’s a right smart dress, that is.”

“Thank you, Lenny. Is that a new coat?”

His grin widened. “Got it off a dead jest bloke this mornin’.”

Well that explained the slight smell. “Do you know where you’re going?”

“Aye. Drew meself a map and everything. Never been to Grosvenor Square before.” He scratched his neck. “But I ‘ear it’s real fancy like.”

“The fanciest.” Her fingers drummed across her lap. “And you know where to wait for me?”

“Behind the back gate,” he said confidently. “Jest like ye told me.”

“Good. Good,” she repeated for herself as a knot of tension coiled in her belly. If all went according to plan, she was about to pull off the largest jewel heist London had ever seen. But if something went wrong...

If something goes wrong you're going to spend the rest of your years rotting away in a prison cell, so best see to it that everything goes right, she told herself sternly.

“Are ye ready, Jul – I mean, *Miss Williams?*”

She drew a deep breath. “Aye, Lenny. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“YOU LOOK SPLENDID dear, positively splendid. Black really does become you.” Beaming at her youngest son, Caroline slipped her arm through the crook of his elbow as they descended the master staircase into the glittering ballroom below. Her husband walked on her other side, his formidable expression softening only when he happened to glance down at his little wife. Resplendent in a gown of ice blue silk draped with a wispy muslin overlay, she put women half her age to shame.

“I feel like a stuffed goose at a dinner party,” Grant muttered, tugging at his white cravat. In addition to his black tailcoat and neck piece, he wore a double breasted satin waistcoat, fawn colored breeches, and gleaming black Hessians. His dark hair was swept back from his temple and set in place with a thin layer of pomade. The severe style accentuated the noble lines of his face and drew the attention of more than one fawning debutante as the Hargraves made their way towards the far corner of the room where an open terrace overlooked Glastonbury’s sprawling gardens.

“Well you make a very handsome stuffed goose,” Caroline said.

“Albeit a distracted one. Why do you keep looking all around, dear? Are you expecting someone?” She exchanged a quick, meaningful glance with her husband. “Someone *special*, perhaps?”

“You could say that,” he said evasively. There was no way to tell if Juliet would dare show her face tonight, but instinct – and intuition – told him there was a reason she’d suddenly reappeared after months of hiding. And he suspected the dowager’s extensive jewelry collection, all of which was on full display tonight, had something to do with it.

The old dame certainly knew how to put on a show, he mused as he surveyed the room, searching in vain for a flash of brilliant auburn amidst the blondes and the brunettes. There had to be at least two hundred people in the ball room, with more arriving every minute. All of the *ton*’s most notable had been invited, from the Duke and Duchess of Ellsworth to Miss Violet Hanover, the most famous actress in all of London. If Juliet really was here, finding her was going to be like looking for a needle in a bloody haystack. But despite the obvious difficulties, it was a challenge he was looking forward to. Even though he didn’t know what the hell he was going to do when he finally caught her and their little game of cat and mouse came to an end.

His head demanded he turn her over the magistrate. She was a criminal and she’d committed a crime. Multiple crimes, actually. Of that there was no question, nor even a lingering trace of doubt. Not after he’d caught her in the damn act. It should have been a simple matter of two plus two...but no matter how many different times or how many different ways he added it up, he could never reach four.

If only Owen had assigned another runner to the case all those months ago. Except then he never would have met her. Never would have kissed her. Never would have learned how soft her skin was or felt the fiery texture of her hair or heard the soft, breathless cry she made when she came...

"I met a young lady just the other day I thought you might be interested in," Caroline said brightly. "A lovely girl. Just lovely. She was at the Countess of Swarthmore's garden soiree and I was so impressed with her that I extended an invitation to our house party."

"You failed to mention that part." The duke frowned at his wife. "Caro, we've talked about this—"

"Yes, yes." She waved away her husband's concerns with a flick of her gloved wrist. "But I know if you met her you would have been just as impressed as I was. Why, you should have seen how she charmed the dowager! I've never heard Dorothea laugh like that in all my years. She gave her an invitation right on the spot. Lady Wilmington's face positively turned *green* with envy. Lovely girl," she repeated. "Witty and graceful and very beautiful. She had the most brilliant red hair I've ever seen."

Grant's head whipped around. "Did you say red?" he said sharply.

"Indeed. I know you've been more partial to brunettes in the past, but—"

"What was her name?" he interrupted.

"Oh." A bit taken aback by her son's sudden interest, Caroline blinked. "Miss Williams. Miss Juliet Williams."

THE TIARA WASN'T HERE.

Juliet glided past the elegant jewelry display in the middle of the ballroom no less than four separate times before she believed it with her own eyes. There were necklaces dripping with sapphires and bracelets weighed down by rubies and pearl chokers that could have belonged to a queen, but the tiara that had *actually* belonged to a queen was conspicuously absent.

“Excuse me,” she said politely, tapping the arm of the burly viscount who had been whirling her around the floor with more enthusiasm than style. “I fear I need to rest.”

He frowned down at her, flesh puckering between his eyebrows. “But the dance is only halfway over.”

“Yes, well, I am afraid it’s all the way over for you.” Slipping free of his sweaty embrace, she beat a hasty retreat before he could request another turn. Fighting her way through the pulsing sea of bodies, she gasped in a lungful of cool evening air as she staggered towards an open window.

After having her feet repeatedly trod on and her arms nearly wrenched from their sockets, she had a new appreciation for the physical demands put upon women at balls. How they danced for hours upon hours – with a smile on their face, no less! – was beyond her. At least the men were able to wear trousers and practical footwear. In her heavy gown and thin slippers she was at the mercy of her partner’s clumsy feet.

Fanning a hand in front of her face, she leaned out the window and gazed down at the gardens below. They were empty now, but she

suspected more than one couple would sneak out for a secret tryst between the shrubbery before the night was through. Behind her the dancing continued as couples joined together in circles of eight for the first Cotillion of the evening. A moment of silent anticipation and then the music began, flowing down in perfect harmony from two separate balconies on either side of the ballroom.

When Juliet finally turned back around the room was a blur of dizzying movement. Taking advantage of everyone's preoccupation with the dance, she began to slowly edge her way along the wall towards a double set of doors that led to the master staircase. The tiara may not have been in the main ballroom, but surely it was *somewhere* in the palatial mansion. All she needed to do was find it.

When the Cotillion came to an end everyone broke apart and clapped politely, their perspiring faces wreathed in smiles. In a surging wave of pastel colors the debutantes began to hunt down their next partner with eagle-eyed determination.

"A glass of champagne, my lady?" A footman neatly intercepted Juliet just as she reached the doors.

"No thank you. I – *Bran?*?" Shocked to see Bran's twinkling blue eyes staring down at her, she gaped at him for a full three seconds before she came to her senses. Her gaze darting left and then right, she grabbed his arm and dragged him behind a potted fern that was nearly as tall as she was. "What are you *doing* here?" she hissed. "And why are you dressed like that?"

In a black coat with brass buttons, knee breeches, and white stockings, Bran looked exactly like all of the other footmen milling

about the ballroom. He'd even powered his hair white, but the smirking grin he wore was all his.

"I thought ye might be able to use a little 'elp," he said with an innocent shrug.

"*Help?*" The word came out strangled. "Since when do I need *help?*"

"Since ye made up yer mind to steal from bleedin' royalty."

"Lower your voice!" she hissed as she glared out through the fern's spiky leaves. Thankfully another dance had begun and it didn't appear as if anyone was paying them any mind. Beside her Bran drained a flute of champagne and tossed the empty glass into the fern pot. She looked back at him in exasperation. "You need to leave. You're going to get us both caught."

"Me? I'm jest a footman doing 'is job." He shifted his tray from one hand to the other. "Do ye know how much these poor blokes make in a week? Why, it's no better than slave labor. And the shite they've got to do! One woman asked me to polish 'er shoe. 'Er *shoe*, Jules. Can ye believe it?"

"Shut *up*, Bran. Let me think." Pinching the bridge of her nose, she drew a deep breath. If she'd wanted Bran's help she would have asked for it, but she knew there was no getting rid of him now. He was far too stubborn and – loathe as she was to admit it – he did have a point. Maybe this *was* a job for two people. "I suppose your being here isn't the worst thing in the world."

"No," he said agreeably. "That would be The Wolf headin' this direction."

"Don't joke, Bran. I'm not the mood."

But he wasn't joking, something she realized when he set down the champagne tray and pulled out a pistol from beneath his jacket.

"Bran!" she gasped, her eyes widening. "Put that away! We're in the middle of a ballroom, for God's sake! You're going to kill someone."

"Aye," he said grimly. "Yer runner."

"He's not my – never mind." She shook her head. "That's not important. What's important is that you put that bloody thing away before we're both arrested!"

With obvious reluctance Bran slipped the pistol back into his jacket, but he kept his hand within easy reach of the weapon. "Do ye at least have a plan?" he growled. "Because I think he's seen ye and he doesn't look none too pleased."

"Yes, of course I have a plan. An *excellent* plan."

He looked at her dubiously. "Ye don't have one, do ye?"

"Not in the slightest." She'd always known Grant's presence at the ball might be a possibility. Their moment of reckoning had been coming from the first night they met. Better to get it over with once and for all than have it continue to linger over her head like an axe ready to fall.

"The tiara is here somewhere," she told Bran urgently. "In the dowager's bedroom, if I had to guess. Find it and meet me on the back terrace at exactly eleven o'clock."

"What about ye?" he frowned.

"Don't worry about me, I can handle myself. Now go!" She gave him a not-so-gentle push. "I'll keep The Wolf busy."

Quick as a cat, Bran slipped out from behind the fern and followed

two women out into the hall. She heard him ask one of them if they'd liked to have their shoes polished as the double doors swung closed. Biting back a smile, she took another deep breath, squared her shoulders, and stepped out to meet her fate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

A HERD OF stampeding horses would have looked less menacing than Grant Hargrave cutting a wide swath through the crowd. He stalked Juliet with a single-minded purpose, his long strides devouring the space between them. His eyes were so filled with fury they appeared black, and it took every ounce of courage Juliet possessed not to turn around and follow Bran out the door.

“Lord Hargrave,” she said sweetly when he jerked to a halt in front of her. His imposing frame towered over her smaller one, forcing her to crane her neck back in order to meet his stormy gaze. “How nice to see you this evening. You’re looking well.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw as he glared down at her. Dressed in formal black with his hair slicked back from his face and gold cufflinks at his wrists, he looked every inch the fancy highborn lord. But the murderous glint in his gaze and the tension vibrating through his body was all runner.

“You made a mistake coming here tonight,” he growled.

“The only *mistake* I made was—” She stopped short. Losing her temper wasn’t going to help anyone, least of all Bran. If she was going

to keep Grant distracted long enough for the tiara to be found she needed to keep a cool and level head.

“Was what?” he prompted, eyes narrowing.

“Never mind. It isn’t important. What is important is that I am an invited guest of the dowager.” She lifted her chin. “So if you were thinking of dragging me back to Bow Street, you’d best think again.”

He smiled humorlessly. “If the dowager knew what you *really* were she would have had you arrested at the gates.”

“And what am I?” she challenged, arching an auburn brow.

Leaning in close enough for her to smell the champagne on his breath, he whispered silkily, “A thief. A liar. A charlatan.” She quivered with awareness when his warm breath fanned across her neck. “A temptress I cannot get out of my head no matter how hard I try. Dance with me, Juliet.” He abruptly stepped back and held out his arm. She stared blankly at his outstretched hand, as if he’d just offered her a cooking pot or a watering can or some other obscure item that had nothing to do with the topic at hand.

“I – *What?*”

“Dance with me,” he repeated. “I can only presume dancing *is* why you accepted the dowager’s invitation.” One corner of his mouth twitched. “I’m sure it had nothing to do with her collection of priceless jewelry.”

“You’re not going to—”

“Arrest you?” he interrupted. “No. At least not tonight. It would cause too big of a scene, and my mother would never let me hear the end of it. She’s an old friend of the dowager’s. But then you knew that

already, didn't you?"

Was this some sort of joke? Her gaze darted from his arm, elegantly dressed in a flawlessly tailored black sleeve, up to his face. He'd taken care to make his expression unreadable, but she thought she detected a slight softening in the hard line of his jaw.

"All right," she said warily. "I'll dance with you. But on one condition."

"For a thief, you certainly have a lot of conditions."

"I could say the same of you, runner."

They stared hard at one another. To Juliet's surprise, Grant was the first to concede their silent battle of wills.

"Very well," he said. "What is your condition?"

"We call a truce." She felt a twinge of guilt knowing that Bran was upstairs at this very moment searching for the tiara, but the guilt quickly faded when she reminded herself of how Grant would have turned her over to the magistrate had she not escaped. "Until the end of the next dance, I'm not a thief. I'm..."

"Miss Williams, the daughter of a viscount?" he suggested when she hesitated.

"Precisely. And you're – well, you can be you."

"How gracious of you," he said dryly. "Shall we, Miss Williams?"

This time she took his arm when he offered it, her gloved fingers resting lightly on the rigid line of his forearm. Side by side they walked towards the middle of the room just as the music began to play and Juliet bit her lip when she recognized the slow, sweeping tune.

Of *course* it would be a waltz, the most intimate of all the dances. But she didn't resist when Grant squared off in front of her and clasped their hands lightly together, nor did she stiffen when he touched the small of her back.

They began to move in perfect harmony, his experience easily masking her rudimentary education whenever she happened to make a small misstep. He was as light on his feet as she remembered, and never once did she fear for the safety of her instep as they swirled effortlessly around the ballroom.

"Where did you learn to dance so well?" he asked curiously. They'd completed their first turn and were just beginning another. Before the waltz reached its conclusion they would complete no less than five turns around the room.

"A friend taught me the basic steps."

"Was this the same *friend* who sent me on a merry chase all through St Giles?" he asked, one dark brow lifting. "I can only assume that's when you infiltrated the garden soiree."

"Infiltrated," she scoffed. "You make me sound like a spy."

"Aren't you? A spy is as adept at changing personas as they are at changing their clothes. Since we first met you've been a boy, a bluestocking, a thief, and a lady. Which makes me wonder." His voice dropped to a husky whisper as he stared deeply into her eyes. "Who is the *real* Juliet?"

When he looked at her like that she felt as though he was peering into the very depths of her soul. Flustered by the intensity of his gaze she glanced away, and nearly tripped over her own foot.

“Oh,” she gasped as she lost her balance and teetered precariously to the side.

“I’ve got you,” Grant murmured, his arm tightening around her back. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She looked up at him sharply, searching for a double meaning behind his words. But if it was there she couldn’t find it, and she chastised herself for being a silly romantic twit. Grant didn’t care for her. If he did, he wouldn’t have left her locked in a room. If he felt anything for her at all, he wouldn’t have—

Wouldn’t have what? A small, unwanted voice of reason interceded. Captured you? That’s his job. Turned you over to the magistrate? That’s his job as well. Except he didn’t turn you over, did he?

Well no, she thought silently. He hadn’t. But that was only because—
He either did or he didn’t.

It’s not as simple as—

He either did. Or he didn’t. Which one is it?

“Didn’t,” she muttered under her breath.

“What was that?” Grant asked, glancing down at her with a half-smile. Devil take it, why did he have to be so bloody *handsome*? Even though she preferred him in less formal attire, there was no denying he cut a dashing figure in his ebony tailcoat and white cravat. For the first time she became uncomfortably aware of the dozens of eyes that were following them as they whirled around the ballroom, including the thoughtful gray gaze of the Duchess of Readington.

“Nothing. Everyone’s watching us,” she said tersely, her small frame automatically tensing beneath the scrutiny. She was accustomed to

living in the shadows, not dancing in the spotlight. Grant, on the other hand, looked completely at ease with the attention.

“Of course they are. I’m one of the most eligible bachelors on the market and you’re the most beautiful woman in the room.” His thumb stroked across the middle of her palm, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. Her gaze jerked to his face, wondering if the small movement had been by accident or design. The rakish gleam in his eye revealed it to be the latter.

“Tell me more about yourself,” he said as they began their third turn. Two more and their temporary truce would be over.

“There is not much to tell,” she said evasively.

“Who are your parents? Where did you grow up? When did you become a—”

“All right, all right.” A mulish frown tugged at her bottom lip. “When I agreed to dance with you I didn’t realize I would be subjecting myself to a grand inquisition.”

“They’re just questions.”

“They’re *personal* questions.”

“Is there a difference?”

“Yes.” What game was he playing at, she wondered? Was all of this – the dance, the sweet words, the subtle touches – a clever ploy to lull her into complacency? Or was it something more? There was only one way to find out.

“Very well. If you *must* know, my parents died in a fire when I was no more than a babe. I don’t remember them. I was raised in the East End. It’s the only home I’ve ever known. From a young age I quickly

learned that if I wanted something I needed to take it, for no one was going to give it to me. What?” she said mockingly when his jaw tightened. “Did you think I learned to steal on a whim? That I did it for fun? Because I can assure you there is nothing *fun* about wondering where your next meal will come from, or fearing someone will discover you’re not the lad you’re pretending to be, or always going to sleep with a knife under your pillow.

“I’m a product of my environment, runner. The same as you are of yours. Do you think your life would have turned out so differently from mine had you been born in a rat-infested flat instead of a fancy estate in the country?” Her eyes glittered as the anger she’d been trying to contain spilled over in a frothy wave of hurt and betrayal. “You sit up on your moral high horse and judge those beneath you as if you have the right to do so because you were born with a title. Well you *don’t* have that right. No one does. You don’t know what I’ve gone through. What I’ve seen.” She was breathing heavily by the time she finished, her chest rising and falling with the rapid beat of her heart.

“You’re right,” he said quietly. Sincerely. Shockingly. “You’re absolutely right. For too long I’ve been trying to add two and two, but no matter how many times or how many ways I do it, you’re always going to be a five. Or a seven. Or a twelve. Anything but a four.”

Her brow creased. “What are you—”

“Dance with me,” he interrupted, gently pulling her forward until the tips of her breasts grazed his hard chest. “Just dance with me.”

She wanted to resist him. To scorn his attention and push him aside. It would have been easier that way. Simpler that way. But

maybe what she felt for Grant was never meant to be easy *or* simple. Maybe they were always meant to be a ball of fire hurtling towards the earth with all the brilliance of a shooting star. A shooting star that was either going to ignite the heavens...or burn to a pile of ash.

There was no way to know what would happen when the music faded and their truce ended. But if she allowed herself, she could have this one moment.

So she took it.

Grant's hand splayed across her back, drawing her even closer. She breathed in his comforting scent and closed her eyes, trusting him not to let her stumble or fall. They danced in silence, letting their bodies and their hearts speak for them as they completed the last turn around the room. When the waltz finally ended and everyone broke apart to clap they only had eyes for one another, both equally reluctant to let the moment go.

But moments were never meant to last forever, and the sound of a gunshot abruptly brought their truce to an end.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“OH MY HEAVENS!” Gray eyes wide, the Duchess of Readington turned to her husband as chaos broke out all around them. “Was that what I think it was?”

“Yes.” Grim faced, Eric took his wife’s hand and immediately headed for the terrace. While everyone else surged to the middle of the ballroom like chickens running into a henhouse, he quickly ushered Caroline down the winding stone steps and out into the gardens.

Dimly lit in an attempt to dissuade guests from venturing into the dowager’s flower beds, the twisting pathways were a shadowy labyrinth of towering shrubbery and stone walls, making it easy to get lost or turned around. But this wasn’t the first time the duke had infiltrated the gardens after nightfall, and he managed to navigate through the dark with ease, Caroline trotting obediently behind him.

He led her to a white gazebo with a wide bench in the middle of it. If his wife’s calculations were correct – which they almost always were – their middle son had been conceived on that bench. It hadn’t

been the first (or the last) time they'd met in the gazebo for a secret rendezvous. Truth be told he'd been looking forward to a repeat performance tonight. Unfortunately, intimacy was the last thing on either of their minds.

"That was a gunshot." Caroline clutched his sleeve. "Eric, that was a *gunshot*. Do you think anyone was hurt?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. He wanted to reassure her, but over the course of their marriage he was proud to say he'd never once told his wife a lie, and he wasn't about to start tonight. Chances were the gunshot had been nothing more than an accident. An overzealous lord showing off his weapon in an attempt to impress a lady. But there was also a chance – however slim – that the gunshot had been an indication of something much more sinister.

Over the past few months there had been a rash of sporadic burglaries in the Mayfair District. Unlike the robberies in the past where only one or two pieces of jewelry were taken and no was ever hurt, these were violent encounters that had left more than one person seriously injured, including his personal friend the Earl of Reinhold.

The way Reinhold had told it he'd been woken in the middle of the night by a loud crash in his wife's dressing chamber. When he went to investigate he discovered three hulking brutes stuffing all of his wife's jewelry into large burlap sacks. The leader, he'd said, was a cruel-looking man with a scar under his eye. He'd shot Reinhold in the shoulder as soon as he had entered the room even though the older man had been unarmed and clearly defenseless. The countess – a dear woman, albeit deaf as a post – had slept through the entire thing.

The burglaries were being investigated by the bobbies who, to the best of Eric's knowledge, had yet to come up with a single suspect. Not surprising, given their general ineptitude.

"I want you to remain here until I return," he told Caroline tersely.

"Until you return?" Her grip on his sleeve tightened. "Until you return from where? Surely you can't mean to go back inside."

"People may need help and I – no," he said when he saw the stubborn set of her chin. "No, it's too dangerous. You're staying here."

Her eyes flashed. "Do not presume to tell *me* what to do, Eric Hargrave."

Bloody hell. Knowing it would be futile to argue, he grabbed her hand, linking their fingers tightly together. "You're as stubborn as Grant, you know," he told her as they hurried back through the gardens.

"Oh Eric," Caroline said, her face paling. "You don't think he's in any danger, do you?"

Thinking of their son, they both increased their pace. And broke into a run when a second gunshot echoed through the night.

WHEN GRANT HAD first spied Juliet from across the room – hiding behind a plant, no less – he'd been so taken aback by her appearance that he had stopped dead in his tracks. If he thought her beautiful before, it was *nothing* compared to how she looked tonight. In her golden ball gown with her hair drawn back in an intricate coil and her skin all aglow she was an absolute vision. Yet despite her finery, he couldn't help but prefer the way she looked when she was in trousers

and a cloak, dirt on her nose and fire in her eyes.

She closed those brilliant green eyes as they completed their final turn around the room, and he felt his heart leap when she trustingly laid her cheek against his chest. A surge of protectiveness swept through his body and he squeezed her hand, his thumb tracing a circle in the middle of her gloved palm.

When the music stopped and the waltz ended she remained nestled against him, her smaller frame fitting perfectly into his larger one. Everything around them slowly softened and then faded away, like a telescope losing focus. His gaze slipping to her sweet little mouth, he contemplated kissing her...

And then all hell broke loose.

At the sound of the gunshot several women screamed. Two fainted. Acting purely on instinct, Grant started to push Juliet behind him but with a horrified gasp she slipped free of his embrace and darted into the confused crowd.

For a moment he was relieved, thinking that she was running *away* from where the sound of the gunshot had emanated from – as any person of sound mind would. Then he caught a glimpse of her heading directly towards the double doors that led to the main stairwell, and his curse turned the air blue.

Bloody woman! What was she about? There was no reason for her to go that way unless...unless she hadn't come to the ball alone. Unless the footman he'd seen her talking to wasn't *really* a footman, but rather an accomplice. One she feared had either shot someone...or been shot themselves.

Truce? She hadn't wanted a truce! She'd just wanted to distract him long enough for her friend to get his hands on whatever it was they'd come to the ball to steal. Once again he'd been played for a fool. And this time he had no one to blame but himself.

"Out of the way," he demanded sharply as he began to push and shove his way through the chaotic swarm of lords and ladies clutching their reticules and breathing heavily into their handkerchiefs. "I said *out of the way!*"

Bursting through the double doors, he stormed up the stairs, his fury at Juliet's newest deceit increasing with every step.

Then he heard her scream. The gut wrenching sound was immediately followed by the sharp *crack* of a second gunshot...and the only thing he felt was fear.

HER HEART IN her throat, Juliet sprinted up the stairs two at a time, her slippers sinking soundlessly into the thick red carpet. She'd *told* Bran to put his pistol away. Hadn't she told him? When she got her hands on him she didn't know whether she was going to strangle him or hug him. Strangle, she decided. Then hug. Then strangle again, just for good measure.

Unless he's dead, a tiny, terrified little voice interceded. Her mouth setting in a mulish line of stubbornness, she immediately quelled the dark thought. Bran wasn't dead. He couldn't be dead. It was impossible. As impossible as the sun not rising or the tides not receding or – or – oh hell, she didn't know! As impossible as falling in love with a runner.

At the top of the staircase she stopped short, her gaze darting wildly left and right. She had no way of knowing for sure where the gunshot had come from, but the acrid smell of smoke gave her a good idea. Firing a gun was a messy business, especially indoors, and it always left a trail behind.

Her nose wrinkling against the burning odor of gunpowder, she shouted Bran's name as she tracked the scent to a private bedchamber at the end of the hallway. The door was slightly ajar and black smoke billowed out from underneath of it, obscuring her view and making her cough as she threw the door open without a thought to her own safety.

"Bran!" she cried when she saw him leaning back against a canopied bed, his face pale and sweating. He had his hand pressed against his side and blood, dark and red, seeped between his fingers. When he heard her cry out his name he lifted his head, and his blue eyes, glassy with pain, flashed with warning.

"Jules, no," he choked out. "Ye need to run! Jules, get the 'ell out of here!"

"What are you talking about? You've been shot! You need a doctor." She ran to him and dropped to her knees beside the bed. Lifting up her dress, she ripped off a strip of her petticoat – thank goodness she'd worn undergarments – and slipped it beneath his hand in an attempt to staunch the flow of blood. He grimaced, but she didn't lessen the pressure. She may not have been a sawbones, but she knew blood was better in the body than out.

"It's all right," she crooned even as if she wondered if the bullet had

pierced any major organs. “You’re going to be all right. We’ll get a doctor, and then–”

“Actually,” a horribly familiar voice drawled from behind her, raising every single hair on the nape of her neck. “A doctor ain’t goin’ to be necessary. ‘Ello, Jules. I was wonderin’ when ye would show up.”

“*Edward.*” She hissed his name even before she turned to see him looming in the doorway. “I should have known.”

He was taller than she remembered. Leaner as well, like an alley cat that had gone too long between meals. His cheeks were gaunt, his shoulders bony beneath a brown jacket that had seen better days, his dark hair flat and greasy. But his eyes – those cruel, beady black eyes – were the same. They bored into her as she slowly stood up, her hands creeping into the air when she saw the pistol he held. The muzzle was still smoking.

“Ye’re lookin’ like a peek dame, ye are.” His tongue slithered across dry, cracked lips. “Like a real *lady.*”

“What do you want?” It was odd, but she wasn’t afraid. The anger she felt for the vile creature standing in front of her was too overpowering. Her blood burned with it, filling her with a wild, reckless rage. This despicable excuse for a man had betrayed her. He’d hurt people. Killed people. And he’d shot Bran. If he wasn’t holding a gun, he’d already be dead.

She’d often wondered if she had what it took to rob another human being of their life. If, when it came down to it, she would be able to do what needed to be done. To steal something that could never be

replaced. Staring at Edward, she finally had her answer.

And it was a resounding yes.

“Don’t ye worry yer pretty little head about that.” His gaze dipped to her breasts, lingered until she felt nausea begin to rise in her throat, and then flicked back up to her face. “Jest find me the tiara. An’ be quick about it. Yer mate took too long an’ look what that got ‘im,” he said, leering at Bran.

He used to be your mate too! Juliet wanted to scream. But she knew it would be useless. The boy they’d played with, lived with, grown with, was completely gone. Erased by jealousy and spite and darkness.

“So you want the tiara.” Her eyes narrowed as a thought suddenly occurred. One she should have had long before now. One she undoubtedly *would* have had if she hadn’t allowed herself to become so distracted by Grant. “You’ve been following me, haven’t you? I thought it might be a runner, but it was really you.”

Which meant she’d led him straight here.

“Aye,” he said, and he sounded proud. “An’ I’ve built meself an empire. I started small. Merchant ships an’ the like. But it took too much manpower and the takes were hard to fence, so I moved on to better an’ bigger things.”

“Jewelry. *You’re* the one who’s been terrorizing the nabobs in Mayfair.” She’d heard of the robberies, of course. Everyone in the East End had. But they’d been so messy and violent, she’d assumed they were being carried out by a couple of inexperienced thugs. Not by someone who should have known better. Who had been *taught* better. “You’re hurting innocent people! If you’re not careful you’re going to

kill someone.”

“And?” he said with a negligent shrug.

She stared at him in amazement. “And you know that’s not what we do! Yeti always said—”

“Yeti’s an old fool. He’ll get what’s coming to ‘im soon enough.”

“If you harm a single bloody hair on his head I swear to every piece of blunt in London there won’t be a hole small enough for you to crawl into. Do you hear me, Edward?”

“It’s Mallack now,” he said, sounding more like a petulant child than a violent criminal.

“Call yourself whatever you want,” she sneered. “As far as I’m concerned a pig is still a pig, and a worthless piece of shite is still a worthless piece of shite.”

“Jules,” Bran rasped. “What are ye—”

“I’ve got this,” she muttered under her breath. It was just another game of distraction, albeit with higher stakes. *Damnit Grant*, she cursed silently as her gaze flicked past Edward to the door. *Where the devil are you?* She couldn’t have been that far in front of him. Any second he was going to come bursting through that door. She was certain. More certain than she’d ever been of anything in her entire life. Because Grant wasn’t the sort of man who ran away danger. He ran *towards* it. To help. To heal. To right the world’s wrongs, one problem at a time. It wasn’t just what he did, it was who he was.

“Ye’re going to pay for that,” Edward growled. He tapped his pistol against the scar she’d given him. White and puckered, it stood out in ugly contrast against his dirty skin. “And ye’re going to pay for this

too.”

“What are *you* going to do? You’re weak, Edward,” she said derisively. “You’ve always been weak, and you’re always going to be—”

“SHUT UP!” Spit flew from the corners of his mouth. “SHUT THE FECK UP!”

“I say, what is all this ruckus?” Completely oblivious to the dangerous situation she was walking into, the Dowager Duchess pushed open the door and toddled right past Edward. “Miss Williams?” she said, squinting at Juliet. “What are you doing in my room? And who is that man by the bed? My heavens! He’s – he’s been *shot*! Miss Williams, we must call for a doctor at once!”

“Who the ‘ell is this old biddy?” Edward demanded as he kicked the door shut. Lifting his gun, he pointed it straight at the dowager whose mouth promptly dropped open.

“No one,” Juliet said quickly. “She’s no—”

“I would you have address me with some respect, sir!” Recovering from her shock at discovering an armed brigand in her private bedchamber with admirable speed, the dowager lifted her chin and, even though she was several inches shorter, managed to look down her nose at Edward. “I am the Dowager Duchess of Glastonbury and you are most decidedly *not* welcome in my home. Leave at once!”

Edward’s mouth thinned as his finger curled around the pistol’s trigger. “I ain’t got time for this.”

“No!” Juliet screamed. Launching herself forward, she knocked the dowager to the ground. There was a deafening roar, an explosion of

smoke, and then there was only darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A RUNNER WAS expected to go where angels feared to tread, but to do so carefully. Methodically. In a way that did not endanger themselves or those around them. In short, they were supposed to remain level-headed at all times. But when Grant heard Juliet's scream and the subsequent gunshot, he stopped thinking with his head and thought only with his heart.

He followed the sharp smell of gunpowder down the hall to a closed door. The door was locked, but one solid blow from his shoulder and it splintered open. The wisest course of action would have been to remain in the doorway and assess the situation. Instead he damned caution to the wind and charged into the room with all the recklessness of a madman.

The first person he saw was the Dowager Duchess, her beaded gown splattered with blood. Her face was pale, but she was still on her feet. There was a man he recognized as the footman slumped against the bed.

Then he saw Juliet.

"No," he choked out, dropping to his knees beside her. She was

sprawled lifelessly on her side, one arm flung over her face. Blood seeped from a wound behind her right ear. It trickled down across her ashen cheek to pool in a circle of dark red on the floor. Feeling his own blood run cold, he lifted two fingers to check her pulse, but before he could place them under the delicate line of her jaw he heard the dowager shout out a warning.

“Behind you, Lord Hargrave!” the elderly woman cried, pointing past him to the door.

Grant didn’t think, he simply reacted. Throwing himself over Juliet while simultaneously drawing his gun, he aimed and fired. Sparks flew into the air as the bullet came flying out of the chamber and struck his target in the shoulder. The man fell back against the wall, the pistol he’d been aiming at Grant’s back falling uselessly to the ground where it bounced once before settling at the feet of the dowager. She immediately picked it up and aimed it at the man Grant had just shot. Her hands, though frail with age, were surprisingly stable.

“This odious villain tried to kill me,” she said darkly. “Were it not for Miss Williams, I would be dead. What would you like me to do, Lord Hargrave? Should I shoot him? I’m an excellent shot. You should see me take down a partridge from twenty yards.”

“No, Your Grace. I don’t think that will be necessary.” Were the situation not quite so dire – and Juliet not quite so still – Grant would have had a good chuckle at the sight of an eighty-two-year-old noblewoman holding a criminal at bay with his own weapon. “But you could go send for a doctor. With all haste,” he added as his gaze slid

back to Juliet. Crouching beside her, he gently took her hand in his. Her delicate fingers were cold, and when he squeezed she didn't squeeze back. His throat tightened.

"What about this scoundrel?" the dowager demanded.

"Don't worry about him. If he moves so much as a bloody inch the next bullet is going straight through his heart." It was not an idle threat. Had Grant been in a better position when he'd fired his gun, the bastard would be dead already.

"Very good." The dowager gave the criminal's pistol to Grant, who slid it into the waistband of his trousers. She looked down at Juliet and tears shimmered in her eyes. "She really did save my life, you know. I'll be back with a doctor as quickly as I can." Then she was gone, and there was nothing to do but wait.

"Is Jules still alive?" This from the footman – who of course wasn't *really* a footman – leaning against the bed. He tried to stand, but with a grimace he clutched his side and slid back down to the floor, his face turning a pale, ghastly gray.

"He shot you as well?" Grant questioned. By the look of it the bullet was still lodged somewhere in the poor bloke's belly. If he didn't receive medical attention soon he was in danger of bleeding out.

"Aye. Edward got both of us. Jules. Is she still alive?"

Grant was afraid to check. He'd never been afraid before. At least not like this. The fear pushed down on his chest, making it difficult to draw a deep, steady breath as he slowly slid his fingers along Juliet's jaw. If he couldn't find a pulse...

But wait! It was there. Thready and inconsistent, but there.

“She’s alive.” He sent up a quick, fervent prayer of gratitude. “She’s alive.”

The only question was for how long. Head wounds were unpredictable. If it had been a glancing blow, her odds of recovery were excellent. But if the bullet had embedded itself in her skull...a tremor passed through him. He couldn’t lose her. Not now. Not when he’d finally come to realize just how much she meant to him.

A long, torturous twenty minutes later the dowager at last returned with the doctor as well as the Duke and Duchess of Readington, both of whom breathed audible sighs of relief when they saw their son was alive and unharmed.

A balding, sharp-eyed man who looked to be in his mid-fifties, if not a bit older, the doctor began to briskly unpack the black leather satchel he’d brought with him. Grant’s gut clenched when he saw him remove one sharp looking instrument after another and line them up in a neat row beside the bed.

“Who would you like me to treat first?” he said as he slid a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles onto his nose.

“Juliet,” Grant said, glancing at the footman who immediately nodded in agreement.

“Aye,” he grimaced. “See to Jules first. She’s far more important than the likes of me.”

“Very well,” said the doctor. “In that case I am going to need the room.”

“I’m not leaving,” Grant said flatly, his hand tightening around Juliet’s. *Wake up*, he willed her silently. *Wake up and yell at me. Wake*

up and point a pistol at me. Wake up and tell me to sod off. Devil take it, just wake up!

The doctor cleared his throat. "I am afraid you must leave, sir. I may have to remove some of the lady's clothing, and it would not be appropriate—"

"I said I'm not leaving," Grant snarled.

"Now see here young man—"

"Darling." Ever the quiet voice of reason, Caroline hurried forward and gently squeezed her son's shoulder. "Darling, let the good doctor do his work now."

"He can bloody well do it with me in the room!"

"Darling," his mother repeated kindly, "I can see this girl means a great deal to you. But I am afraid there is nothing else you can do to help her at the moment except listen to the doctor."

"I can't leave her," Grant whispered hoarsely as he stared down at Juliet's pale face. Her auburn lashes stood out in stark contrast against her white cheeks. She looked like a sleeping angel, and his heart ached at the thought of her leaving him for heaven.

"But of course you can't." Having never seen her son in such a state before, Caroline looked helplessly at her husband, who gave a firm nod. "Except you must. Not only is the doctor correct and it would be inappropriate, but this *thug*" – she looked scathingly at Edward – "must be taken to Bow Street. I will remain with Miss Williams. If there is any change, I will send for you at once."

"I shall stay as well," said the dowager, stepping forward.

"There, you see? Miss Williams could not be better hands."

“You’re going to be all right,” Grant told Juliet as he gently lifted her hand and kissed the back of it. “God knows you’re too stubborn to die.”

Had the corner of her mouth twitched? It was impossible to know for certain, but it gave him hope.

“If you would just lift Miss Williams onto the bed before you go, I can begin my work. Gently,” the doctor said, hovering anxiously to the side as Grant carried Juliet to the bed as if she were made of glass. “We don’t want to jostle her any more than necessary. Excellent, excellent. Now if you could help this gentleman into another room...” he glanced down at the footman, who tried to stand but failed miserably.

“I’ll do it,” the duke volunteered. “Where would you like him, Dorothea?”

“He can go right into the adjoining chamber. It’s through that door there. That used to be my husband’s room, you know. He would roll over in his grave if he knew a servant was going to use it.” The dowager gave a rare smile. “Serves him right, the fat adulterous bastard. Serves him right.”

JULIET SLEPT FOR four days and four nights. On the morning of the fifth day she awoke with a pounding head and a ravenous appetite.

“You there,” she said, sitting bolt upright and scaring a poor scullery maid half to death. “Where am I?”

“You’re – you’re awake!” the maid gasped, dropping the pile dirty of linens she’d been collecting onto the floor.

“Of course I’m awake,” Juliet said irritably. “I’m talking, aren’t I? Is there any food to be had? I’m starving.”

“Yes – yes, my lady. At once, my lady. I’ll be right back, my lady.”

“You didn’t tell me where I am!” Juliet called out after the maid, but she’d already fled the room. On a heavy sigh, Juliet fell back onto her pillows. Her very soft, very luxurious pillows. Pillows that were stuffed to the brim with feather down and must have cost a small fortune. Frowning, she looked up...and saw a rich velvet canopy draped over the top of her bed. As her gaze wandered from an antique secretary’s desk in rich mahogany to a sterling silver wash basin (who on earth did *she* know that would have a sterling silver wash basin?), her last memories began to resurface, slowly and then all once in a mad rush of color and sound that left her dizzy and gasping for breath.

She remembered Lenny driving her to the ball.

‘Is that a new coat?’

‘Got it off a dead bloke jest this mornin’.’

She remembered having her feet trod on by the earl, and then having a heated discussion with Bran behind a fern plant.

‘You need to leave. You’re going to get us both caught.’

‘Me? I’m jest a footman doing ‘is job.’

She remembered Grant storming up to her.

‘You made a mistake coming here tonight.’

And their temporary truce.

‘Dance with me. Just dance with me.’

Her mind lingered on that memory, clinging to it longer than the

rest. She remembered how content she'd felt in his arms, as if she could stay there forever. She remembered closing her eyes, trusting that he wouldn't let her fall. And then...and then...

A gunshot.

What came next made her flinch, but there was no way she could escape it.

She remembered running up the stairs and down the hallway. Finding Bran, bloody and nearly unconscious, slumped against the bed. Turning around and seeing Edward. No, not Edward. *Mallack*.

She remembered taunting him in an attempt to stall until Grant could reach them. The Dowager Duchess entering the room, demanding to know what the ruckus was all about. Mallack lifting his gun. And then...blankness.

She thought there might be something in the dark. A deep, husky voice. A soft, gentle touch. But she was distracted from her recollections when a brisk knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," she said, sitting up a bit straighter in the bed even though it caused her head to throb unmercifully. Bloody hell. It felt as if she'd downed two gallons of gin. But she'd never touched the stuff after she and Eddy shared a bottle one night and she spent the entire next day puking her guts up.

Accompanied by two maids each carrying a large covered platter of food, the Dowager Duchess swept into the room with all the authoritative force of a king. "Put the poached eggs, sausages, and toasted bread here. The pastries and sweet cakes can go over there."

Did she say sweet cakes?

“And for heaven’s sake,” the dowager snapped, “someone open these curtains. It’s like a tomb in here.”

One of the maids rushed to obey, and Juliet winced when the curtains were thrown open and a rush of bright sunlight spilled into the room. The pain in her eyes tempered by the breakfast tray that was placed upon her lap, she began to devour her breakfast with vigor, stuffing entire handfuls into her mouth before she looked up to see the two maids gazing at her in horror.

“Leave us,” the dowager ordered with a flick of her wrist. The maids scurried out, and the dowager sat down beside the bed. “Now then,” she said, crossing her legs at the ankle and neatly resting her hands on her knees. “I suppose it is time you told me who you *really* are.”

“I don’t–”

“No lying,” the dowager said sternly. “If you are afraid I am going to throw you out on your ear or call for the magistrate, you needn’t be. You saved my life, young lady, and for that I will be forever in your debt.”

“I saved your life?” Juliet blinked.

“You don’t remember?”

“No. I remember you coming into the room, but after that...” she shrugged helplessly. Then her eyes widened. “Bran! Is Bran all right? What happened to him? Is he–”

“The doctor said your friend will make a full recovery. He also mentioned that a head injury like the one you suffered could cause memory lapses, which no doubt explains why you don’t remember

jumping in front of me.”

“Head injury?” For the rest time she gingerly touched her temple, and was shocked when her fingers encountered a thick bandage.

“Yes. You were shot when you pushed me out of the way of that awful Mallack fellow. Thankfully it was only a glancing blow, but you still gave us all a fright. You’ve been asleep for four days.”

Four *days*?

“Can you recall your name?” the dowager asked.

Juliet nodded.

“Your *real* name?” she said meaningfully.

“Juliet. My name is Juliet.” And then, because the dowager struck her as a no-nonsense type of woman who would stay true to her word, she told her the rest. Between bites of sausage and the fluffiest poached eggs she’d ever tasted, she told her all about her life in St Giles. She told her about Yeti and Bran and Eddy. About learning to become a thief, and the daily perils that accompanied a life in the East End. She told her what Eddy had tried to do, and how she and Bran had banished him. Then, without really meaning to, she told her all about Grant.

“Fascinating,” the dowager murmured when she’d finally finished. “Positively fascinating. You may just be the most interesting young woman I have ever encountered. And that’s saying something, given how old I am.”

“You’re really not going to send for the magistrate?”

“As long as you promise not to run off with any of my jewelry, I see no need. In fact, you are welcome to remain here as my guest for as

long as you like. You needn't ever return to that horrible St Giles ever again."

"I...don't know what to say." Part of her was awestruck at the dowager's offer. To live in a fancy swell like this was something she'd never even dared to dream about. But another part of her already missed St Giles. She knew for most it was horrible. The most horrible place in all of London. But for her, it was home.

"Think about it," the dowager advised. "In the meantime, if you are feeling up to it, there is a certain gentleman here to see you. He has been pacing a hole in my favorite parlor rug for three days now. Should I send him up?"

"Who is it?" she asked even as her stomach fluttered and her traitorous heart gave a quick lurch inside of her chest.

"Oh, I think you already know the answer to that."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CONFESSING ONE'S LOVE was never an easy task. Confessing one's love to a woman who had a penchant for knives and a tendency to bolt was particularly difficult. Thankfully, in her current state of recovery Juliet was not capable of either one.

Or so Grant hoped.

The last time she'd been on the other side of a door he'd broken it down without a second thought. Now he hesitated in the hall, his mind whirling with all the bits and pieces of the carefully prepared speech he'd been crafting for the better part of a week.

What if he forgot something? Or said too much? What if she looked at him with absolute loathing? Or, worse yet, ordered him out of the room before he could say anything at all?

His mouth settling into a grim line of determination, he raised his fist and rapped his knuckles against the door. No matter what she did or said, he owed her the truth. He owed *both* of them the truth. And the truth was that sometime between all of the kissing and the chasing and the stabbing and the kissing he'd bloody well fallen in love with her.

He just hadn't realized it until she'd almost been taken away from him.

"Come in," she said softly.

Bracing himself for whatever was to come, he walked into the sunlit room and closed the door quietly behind him. Juliet sat up in the middle of the bed, her small body dwarfed by a mountain of pillows. There was still a white bandage wrapped around her temple, but otherwise she looked far better than she had just two days ago when the dowager had permitted him to sit by her side and read from one of his mother's favorite Jane Austen novels. Her cheeks were rosy and one of the maid's must have washed her hair while she slept, for it had a bright gleam to it that brought out the faint dusting of freckles across her nose.

"May I?" he said gruffly, nodding at the chair beside her bed.

"Please."

Feeling awkward and stilted, he sat down. "You look well."

"Thank you. Aside from a pounding headache, I feel much better. Not that I know how I felt before given I've been unconscious for four days." A wry smile flitted across her mouth. "But I can only assume it was much worse than how I feel now." She hesitated. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"No," he said immediately. "Of course not."

She blinked her big green eyes right at him. "Do I know you?"

Grant's heart sank like a stone. The doctor had warned him that Juliet might have difficulty with her memory – head wounds can be unpredictable, he'd said – but he didn't think that meant she would

forget who he was. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

“You...I...We...”

“I’m only *joking*, runner.” With a peal of laughter she collapsed back onto the pillows.

“That’s not funny,” he said darkly.

“It would be if you could have seen your face! Oh,” she gasped, wiping at the tears that had gathered in the corners of her eyes. “That was good. And no less than you deserved for coming here to arrest me.”

Impertinent woman.

“I did not come here to arrest you,” he scowled.

She rolled her eyes. “But of course you did. Why *else* would you be here?”

Feeling rather put out that nothing was going according plan, he leaned forward and half growled/half shouted, “To tell you that I’ve fallen in love with you!”

Juliet’s mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. “You – you what?” she whispered.

“That wasn’t how I meant to say it.” Gnashing his teeth together, he stood up with so much force his chair toppled over. Ignoring it, he began to pace back and forth in front of the windows. “I had a damn speech prepared.”

“You had – you had a *speech*?”

“Yes. I had things I wanted to say. Important things.” He whirled to face her. “Things about my past and my sense of responsibility and how you ruined everything.”

“How I ruined everything,” she repeated slowly.

“Yes. No.” He raked a hand through his hair. “I don’t bloody know!”

“It was *your* speech,” she pointed out.

Did she think he didn’t *know* that? That he didn’t know how he was bungling the entire thing up? For once, why couldn’t something go right between them? “For as long as I can remember, I’ve always seen things as right or wrong. Black or white. Then you came into my life, and it was like I was seeing color for the very first time.”

“Oh,” she whispered as tears that had nothing to do with laughter glistened in her eyes.

“I thought I was chasing you because it was my duty, and I suppose it was. But somewhere along the way it became more than that.” He walked to the edge of the bed. When she held out her hand, he took it, and this time when he squeezed her fingers she squeezed back. “I believed that if I turned you over to the magistrate, it would end the game between us and any feelings I had for you. But I was wrong. What we had between us – what I hope we still *have* between us – was never a game. And I never want it to end.”

JULIET COULD NOT believe what she was hearing. If not for the deep sincerity in Grant’s gaze and the desperate tightness with which he was holding her hand, she would have thought he was playing a joke on her as she had on him. But he wasn’t joking. He really did love her.

Lord Grant Hargrave, the third son of a duke and second-in-command of the Bow Street Runners, loved *her*. A common born thief.

If she hadn't heard it with her own ears she never would have believed it. And for the second time in only a matter of minutes, she didn't know what to say.

"I..." She trailed off, shaking her head in disbelief. "I love you too?"

"Is that a question?"

"I don't know," she said honestly. "What about all of the crimes I've committed? All of the jewelry I've stolen?"

"I don't suppose you've kept any pieces that could be returned."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Not a one."

"Juliet..."

"Oh, all right," she said sulkily. "I may have a *few* tucked away."

"Then you'll give those back, and I'll make sure the captain pardons you for the rest."

Her eyes widened. "You would do that for me?"

"You said yourself that you never stole from anyone who couldn't afford it. While I cannot condone your actions..." He brushed his thumb across her knuckles. "I finally understand them. And if the captain can pardon Felix Spencer, then he can damn well do the same for you."

"But you're not going to stop being a runner." And if he remained a runner, and if she remained a thief, any type of future between them was over before it ever had a chance to begin. If they had any chance at all, one of them was going to have to give up what they loved most.

"I could. If you asked me to, I could leave Bow Street tomorrow and fulfill my duties as a lord."

“You could do that,” she said, studying him closely. “But you don’t want to.”

“No,” he admitted. “I don’t. It’s something I’ve been struggling with for a very long time, but if given the choice between being a lord and a runner I would rather be the latter. I was never meant to live a life of leisure.”

No, he wasn’t. A warmth started to spread throughout Juliet’s body. It started in her heart and then rushed outwards, filling her with a glow so bright it rivaled the sun. If this was love, then she wanted more of it. If this was love, then she wanted a lifetime.

“If you could stop being a runner for me...I guess I could stop being a thief for you.”

He gazed down at her intently. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” And to her surprise, she was. “It’s not as if I could be a thief *forever*. Eventually I’ll be caught, or killed, and then where would I be? Better to stop now and go out on top. Don’t you think?”

“I think you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” he said achingly before he lowered his head and took her lips in a kiss that endearingly gentle.

“But,” she warned, holding her finger up between them when he drew back. “If you are somehow under the impression that I am going to sit idly by and spend my time wandering through the park and attending luncheons and balls, you’re sorely mistaken.”

“You’re welcome to pursue whatever venture you like. Money is not an issue. You could be a patroness of the local hospital, or join a committee for the arts, or—”

“I want to work on Bow Street.”

“Bow Street?” he said incredulously. “You can’t work on Bow Street.”

“Why not? Felix works on Bow Street.”

“That’s because Felix is a–”

Her eyes narrowed.

“–older,” he corrected quickly. “Felix is older than you.”

Smart man.

“I know more about St Giles than half the runners combined. I can help you catch the *really* bad criminals. The ones who actually deserve to be in Newgate.”

Grant looked at her with equal parts aggravation and affection. “I will speak to the captain tomorrow and see what I can do.”

“Good. Then I only have one more condition.”

He sighed. “I figured as much.”

“I want you to always chase me. Even if we become an old boring married couple – which we *never* will – I want you to keep chasing me. Can you do that?”

His eyes darkened with lust, and need, and a love so deep it filled her soul. “I told you once that I’d chase you to the ends of the earth. I meant it then, and I mean it now.”

“Then that’s it?” she said, hardly able to believe their happily-ever-after could be as easy as that after all the obstacles that had separated them for so long. Yes, there had been some compromises. A few sacrifices. And she was sure there would be more before all was said and done. But for the first time in her life, she’d gotten exactly what

she desired...and she hadn't even had to steal it.

“No,” Grant murmured before he kissed her again, his mouth lingering on her lips until she moaned his name and clutched his shirt.

“That’s only the beginning.”

EPILOGUE

ONCE JULIET WAS feeling better she made the short journey to Litchfield Park where the Hargrave's annual house party was well underway. To her pleasant surprise, she was welcomed with open arms by Grant's entire family. The duchess was elated her youngest son had finally fallen in love, and the duke was happy that his wife was happy.

Grant joined her three days later (he'd remained in London until Mallack was sentenced) and they spent the next month and a half frolicking about the estate like children.

They still argued at least once a day, but neither one of them would have it any other way. Especially since their arguments almost always ended in a passionate embrace. With so many guests in attendance they'd had to get a bit creative with where they had their trysts – Juliet still had a crick in her neck from one particularly adventurous romp in a broom closet – but that only made it all the more exciting.

Two nights ago they'd snuck down to the pond with the notion of a sultry midnight dip in the water (sans clothes, of course) whereupon they'd discovered Grant's parents had had the same idea.

Juliet *still* couldn't look at the duke without blushing.

Then, on the night before they were due to return to London, Grant asked her to marry him. Following in the footsteps of the rest of their courtship, the proposal was – in a word – unusual. Instead of presenting her with a ring, Grant hid it somewhere in the estate and gave Juliet a series of clues to its location.

It took her the better part of two hours, but eventually she discovered the ring was in his pocket the entire time.

"That's cheating!" she accused, batting him playfully on the shoulder.

"It was all there in the clue. 'You'll find diamond's fire with what you most desire'."

"I thought you meant your mother's jewelry. What?" she said defensively when he lifted a brow. "She has a very nice collection."

"You didn't take anything, did you?"

"Of course not. I'm a *reformed* thief, remember?"

"And now you're my fiancée," he growled possessively before he snatched her up by the waist and whirled her around. She felt his arousal as he slid her slowly down the length of his body and she squealed when he pinched her nipple.

"Not now," she hissed, her gaze darting to the door. "The ball is about to begin."

"No one will notice if we're late," he said huskily as he lowered his head and began to kiss his way down her neck.

"*Everyone* will notice if we're late." But she was fighting a losing battle, and they both knew it. With a roguish grin Grant swept her up

in his arms and carried her to the sofa. Gently lowering her down onto the cushions, he slid his hand up her skirt...and soon the ball was the furthest thing from her mind.

MEANWHILE, in London, Bran was indulging in a similar activity with a delightfully flexible barmaid when he heard a frantic pounding on the door. Frowning, he untangled himself and stood up.

“Where are you going?” the barmaid protested. “We were only getting started.”

They’d been tugging like rabbits for two hours, but who was keeping track?

“Someone’s ‘ere. Take this.” He tossed a small pistol onto the bed and tucked another into his waistband.

“What am I supposed to do with *that*?”

“If anyone comes into this room who ain’t me, shoot them.” Arming himself with a knife for good measure, he trotted down the steps two at a time. “I’m coming, I’m coming,” he called out irritably when the pounding intensified.

Who the devil would come knocking at his door at this hour? Jules was in the country, and all his mates were still getting drunk down at the tavern where he’d found the barmaid. Maybe she had a jealous husband or lover she’d forgotten to mention...

Cocking the pistol, he unlocked the door and slowly opened it towards him.

“Lilly?” he gaped, nearly dropping the gun when he saw who was standing on his doorstep. “What the hell are ye doin’ here? Are ye all

right?”

As soon as he got a good look at her it was clear she was far from all right. Her pale blonde hair was in wild disarray and her bodice was torn. There was mud splattered across her skirt, as if she'd run all the way here, and there was a gash in her cheek that looked as though it had come from the sharp end of a blade.

“What happened?” he said sharply when she fell, sobbing, into his arms.

“It's – it's The Slasher,” she gasped, lifting terrified violet eyes to his. “He's trying to kill me.”

A DANGEROUS

PASSION

- *Bow Street Brides, Book 4* -

JILLIAN EATON

A DAMSEL IN DISTRESS...

Lilly has been waiting a long time for her knight in shining armor to arrive. Already betrayed by one man, she's hesitant to trust another. Yet from the first moment she and Bran meet she senses he is different. He may be a scoundrel with the devil's own smile, but when she's wrapped in his arms she's never felt safer.

A THIEF IN SHINING ARMOR...

A charming rogue with a heart of gold, Bran is immediately taken with Lilly. He's tempted to keep her as his mistress, but he knows the shy, velvet-eyed beauty deserves better than a thief. Determined to leave her alone for her own good, he nearly succeeds...until she comes knocking at his door late at night, her eyes glassy with terror and her dress covered in blood.

A DANGEROUS PASSION...

After nearly becoming the latest victim of a crazed madman that has been terrorizing London, Lilly can think of no one else to turn to except for Bran. He may have broken her heart, but he's the only man she trusts with her life. As they try to outwit a murderer at his own dangerous game, Lilly and Bran's faith in one another will be pushed to its limits. But they'll also discover a love stronger than they ever dared hope for...if The Slasher doesn't kill them first.

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PROLOGUE

BRAN'S HEARTBEAT ROARED in his ears as he gazed down at her. It was his first time, and he was so nervous the back of his neck glistened with a thin layer of sweat.

In the white wash of moonlight she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Every curve glittered. Every facet shone. Every caret gleamed. He touched her gingerly, fingertips stroking down her front with reverence. Lowering his head and closing his eyes, he breathed in her scent. She smelled of lavender and ice, like a bouquet of flowers that had been left outside in the—

“Are ye going to bugger the damn thing or are ye going to steal it?” a growling voice demanded from outside the open window.

Embarrassed heat flooded Bran's face as he hastily shoved the diamond necklace into his coat pocket and jumped away from the dresser. For a moment he gazed yearningly at the jewelry he was leaving behind, but his mentor – the gruff, grizzled faced Yeti waiting impatiently at the bottom of the ladder – had been clear.

‘One take, one necklace,’ he had warned Bran as they'd slipped through the shadowy hedgerows of Berkley Square. *‘Don't get greedy and ye won't get caught’.*

Since Yeti had been at the game longer than most and had never

once felt the slap of iron on his bony wrists, it was a mantra Bran intended to follow to the letter. Patting his pocket to make certain the necklace was secure, he swung one long leg over the windowsill and shimmied down the narrow ladder quick as a cat.

“Well?” Yeti demanded before he’d gotten his second foot on the ground. “Do ye have it or not?”

Pride in his achievement had Bran’s chest lifting as he fished inside his pocket and withdrew the necklace. “I got it, all right. Easy as pie.”

“There’s a good lad.” Yeti and Bran would never be connected by blood, but there was a decidedly paternal gleam in the older man’s eye as he slapped his young protégée on the shoulder. “I knew ye could do it.”

Bran had known – or at least he’d *thought* – he could as well, but it was good to have validation in the form of a priceless piece of jewelry that had once belonged to the infamous Countess of Swarthmore. Now it was his, all his, and he–

“Oy!” he protested when Yeti nipped the necklace of his hand. “What are ye doin’?”

“Keep yer voice down,” Yeti said mildly as he unhooked the ladder from the window and slid it together. One of his own designs, it folded down into a neat little rectangular box of hinged steps no bigger than a sack of bread. “Ye didn’t really think ye were goin’ to keep the piece, did ye lad? Consider it the price of yer training. Now pick up the ladder and let’s get the ‘ell out of here. All these rich nabobs are makin’ me feet itch.”

Bran’s mouth opened. Closed. Knowing it would be useless to argue,

he picked up the ladder and obediently followed Yeti out of Berkley Square and back to the East End where the stench of unwashed bodies and refuse settled over him like a warm, comforting blanket. He may not have been born into London's rookeries but he'd been raised in them, and at fourteen years of age – or thereabouts – he knew every dark alley like the back of his hand.

A single candle had been left burning in the cramped two-bedroom flat he shared with his siblings. They were no more related to him than Yeti was, but their bond, one forged on the dangerous streets of St Giles where children rarely saw their tenth birthday, was thicker than blood.

Eddy's soft snores indicated he was asleep, but Jules – a lanky redhead with sharp green eyes and budding breasts she kept wrapped tight to her chest – was wide awake and waiting.

"Did ye get it?" she whispered, scooting to the side of her cot to make room for him to sit down.

"O'course I did," Bran said matter-of-factly.

"What was it like?" As the youngest – and the only female – in their little gang of three, Jules was still waiting for Yeti to take her on her first solo heist. "Were ye scared?"

"Scared?" he scoffed. "Of what?"

"Being caught by the Runners."

Bran rolled his eyes. "They don't scare me."

"Me either."

Leaning back on the cot, Bran pillowed his hands behind his head and stared thoughtfully up at the ceiling. "What do ye want to be

when ye grow up?”

“A thief,” Jules said without hesitation. “What about you?”

“A thief.” He thought of the diamond necklace. Of the thrill he’d gotten from holding it in his hands, and the disappointment he’d felt when he had to give it to Yeti. “The best bloody thief London has ever seen.”

CHAPTER ONE

NO ONE *wanted* to work at The Lusty Mermaid. Carved out of the rotting hull of a pirate ship that had been dragged ashore by the British Navy, the noisy pub was a den for the desperate, the damned... and the drunk.

Barely flinching as a glass went sailing over her head and shattered against the wall, Lilly James kept walking towards her table, narrow hips gently swaying in time with her steps. She greeted the trio of leering sailors with a coy, flirtatious smile, silky blonde hair tumbling back over her shoulder as she tossed her head and batted her lashes.

“Here ye are gentleman,” she said demurely.

“Took ye long enough,” the sailor on the right complained even as the one on the left reached out and cupped her bottom, fingers squeezing into her flesh as if he had every right to touch her body without permission. Which, in The Lusty Mermaid, he did.

No, Lilly reflected silently as she carried the empty tray back to the bar. No one wanted to work here. And yet when one made stupid mistakes, this was where one invariably ended up. Well, either here or one of the brothels that lined Fleet Ditch like fleas on a dog.

When she first found herself abandoned in the middle of London's most nefarious rookery without a shilling to her name she was ashamed to admit that she'd actually considered becoming a lady of the night. But then, through a twist of sheer luck (one of the few she'd had over the past five years), she'd gotten herself a job as a serving wench at the Mermaid.

Although sometimes she wondered if she wouldn't have been better off in one of the brothels.

"Busy night." Red the bartender – so named for his bushy red beard – spoke without looking at her as he weighed down her tray with half a dozen pints of dark ale. "Best step lively or the boss is gonna be none too pleased with ye."

Her slender arms trembling beneath the weight of the tray, Lilly cast a frosty glare down to the far end of the bar where a curvy brunette was lingering beside a handsome dark-haired stranger.

A hush had fallen over the boisterous crowd when the stranger had walked into the Mermaid and more than one person had hissed the word '*Runner*', leading her to believe he was one of the thief-catchers from Bow Street. She didn't have any idea what he was doing here, nor did she care to find out. A Runner this deep in the East End spelled nothing but trouble. Something she'd learned the hard way to avoid at all costs.

"Maybe if Tessa actually did some work we wouldn't be so busy," she said with one last narrow-eyed glare at the brunette.

"That one? Work?" Red snorted incredulously. "That's a good one, lass. Ye'd have better luck waiting for silver crowns to drop from the

sky. Get a move on, then. The tables aren't going to serve themselves."

Blowing a curl out of her eyes, Lilly fixed a smile on her face before sashaying back into the crowd of cutthroats and thieves. Still fuming over Tessa's laziness, she didn't notice the young lad heading straight towards her until it was too late to change course.

The pints went sailing into the air as they crashed into each another. Thrown off balance, Lilly went reeling to the side and landed on the lap of a sailor who smelled like fish that had been left out too long in the sun. Instinctively she tried to scramble free, but his wiry arms closed around her like two iron manacles snapping into place.

"What do we have here?" he whispered, his tongue leaving a wet, slimy trail down the side of her neck as bedlam erupted all around them.

Filled to the brim with the worst sort of humanity London had to offer, the Mermaid was always a powder keg on the brink of eruption and it only took a small spark – or in this case, spilled ale – to set it off.

"Oy!" yelled a sailor, jabbing a finger at the boy who had run into Lilly and was now slinking towards the back door with his head down. "One of those were mine, ye clumsy bastard!"

Someone fired their pistol at the ceiling and that was all it took. More guns exploded and the serving wenches went running for cover as men, driven by violent tempers and too much drink, went after each other like wild dogs.

Lilly's scream for help was lost in the chaos of flying fists and angry shouts as the sailor tossed her over his shoulder and headed for the

stairs. She fought wildly, hitting his back and driving her knees into her belly, but he just laughed and slapped her bottom.

“Not to worry, luv. Ol’ Jack will take good care of ye, and Peter will finish ye up.” Another sailor, this one even dirtier than the one who was holding her like a sack of potatoes, fell into step behind them and Lilly’s stomach twisted painfully. She knew what would happen if these despicable animals dragged her into one of the bedrooms upstairs. Just as she knew there was nothing she could do to stop them. They were stronger than she was, and if there was anything she’d learned since coming to live in the East End it was that brute strength always trumped morality.

Tears stung the corner of her eyes as she looked down at the mayhem below, desperately searching the tavern for a glimpse of Red. He would help her, but he was too busy guarding the ale to even realize she’d been taken. For an instant her gaze locked on the lad who had started everything and then she was being carried into a small, dingy room and dropped with painful suddenness onto a hard mattress that did little to cushion her fall.

She struggled to drag air into her burning lungs, but just as she managed to catch her breath the second sailor, the one the first had called Peter, yanked her arms above her head.

“Let me go!” She flailed wildly, hair whipping across her cheeks as she tried to break free. Fear choked her, making it hard to breathe. Through the thin veil of terror and desperation clouding her vision she was dimly aware of Jack undressing at the foot of the bed. Not even bothering to take off his shirt, he simply unbuttoned his trousers and

shoved them down past his knees. Her stomach rolled when he licked his lips in anticipation.

"Please," she choked out, but he just laughed.

"No need to fight, lass. I'll make it good for ye. Although I do like 'em feisty." He grabbed her ankle and she kicked out, managing to strike his soft belly with the hard heel of her shoe. Grunting, Jack doubled over. "Hold 'er still," he demanded as he straightened and shoved up her skirts, exposing a shift so flimsy and worn it was all but see-through.

"The wench is slippery as a damn eel!" Peter growled.

Lilly flinched when he lifted his hand to strike her, but the blow never came. Instead the door slammed open and the loud, unmistakable *click* of a pistol being cocked stopped both men in their tracks.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." To Lilly's disbelief, the boy who had crashed into her downstairs sauntered into the room bold as you please and arched a brow. "Why don't you blokes find something else to twist your fancy? I don't think the lady's interested in those tiny little knobs between your legs."

"Who the 'ell are you?" Jack's face flushed a dull, mottled red as he grabbed his trousers and yanked them back up to his waist. "This ain't none of yer concern!"

"He ain't gonna shoot us," Peter sneered. "Look at 'em. He's a green lad who ain't seen 'is first whisker yet." He grinned, revealing a blackened row of rotten teeth. "Don't worry, boy. This one's got plenty of fight in 'er. Ye can have yer turn when we're done."

The boy just grinned. "I am going to count to three, and then I am going to start shooting. *One...*"

Lilly's eyes darted between the three men. She was grateful the boy was trying to help her, but in such close quarters any bullet was just as likely to hit her as it was one of the sailors. Holding her breath, she began to inch her way across the mattress.

"Go on," Peter urged Jack. "He ain't gonna do nuffin'."

"*Two.*"

There was a sharp, deafening explosion of sound and then a plume of thick black smoke filled the room.

Lilly screamed. Or at least she *thought* she screamed. It was hard to hear anything over the roaring in her ears.

"Ahh!" Clutching his shoulder, Jack reeled back against the wall. Blood, dark and red, poured between his fingers. Shuddering at the gruesome sight Lilly averted her gaze, fingers knotting in the dirty folds of the bedsheet.

"What the 'ell happened to three?" Jack shouted.

"Sorry," the boy said with a negligent shrug. "I guess I forgot."

"No wench is worth this shite." With a wrathful glare at Lilly as if he was *her* fault he'd found himself on the wrong end of a pistol, Jack stumbled out of the room. Peter followed, muttering something to the boy on his way out.

"Are you all right?" Tucking the pistol back into the folds of his oversized coat, the boy rushed over and helped Lilly to sit up. She flinched when he touched her, but his hands – curiously small, even for a young boy – were gentle.

“I – I think so.” Drawing in a deep breath, she brushed a tendril of hair out of her eyes and looked up at her rescuer with a watery smile. “Ye – ye didn’t have to do that.”

“Of course I did. We women need to stick together.”

Lilly’s winged brows drew together in confusion. “Women? But aren’t ye a...” Her voice trailed away as she began to see the ‘boy’ in a new light. He – or rather *she* – may have been dressed in masculine attire, but the delicate nose, high cheekbones, and tip-tilted eyes were all female. It was a wonder Lilly hadn’t realized the truth sooner, but then she’d been a little bit distracted.

“A hat and a bit of extra cloth.” The woman patted her chest. “They leave you alone if they think you’re like them. For the most part.” She glanced suddenly over her shoulder, as if she’d just remembered something of great importance. “I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

“Wait! Don’t go,” Lilly cried, her heart hammering at the thought of being left alone. What if Jack and Peter came back? There was nowhere she could hide. Nowhere she could run. Her entire life – everything she owned, every shilling she’d ever made – was trapped inside this rotting hull of old wood and broken dreams all because she’d been foolish enough to fall for a silver-tongued rake. “Take me with you,” she said, gazing up at the woman beseechingly.

“Oh, I really don’t think–”

“Please.” Lilly wasn’t above begging. Once she’d fancied herself too proud for it, but then she used to be too proud for a lot of things she now did without question. “I – I don’t want to be here anymore.” Her voice broke. “I can’t. Please, please take me with you.”

“You don’t even know where I’m going.”

Her laugh was as bleak as their surroundings as she gestured around the room with a sweep of her hand. “Anywhere is better than here.” She waited for the woman to tell her to sod off. But to her surprise, she nodded. It was a reluctant sort of nod, but a nod nevertheless.

“Find somewhere to hide tonight and go to Ginny’s Antiquities on Fleet and West Broad first thing tomorrow morning,” she instructed. “Ask for Yeti, and tell him Juliet sent you. He’ll see that you are taken care of.”

For all Lilly knew she could have been walking into a brothel, but she was willing to take her chances. She wasn’t safe at the Mermaid anymore. If she’d ever been safe to begin with. Red did his best, but as tonight had shown he couldn’t always be there to protect her. She should count her lucky stars she’d managed to work this long without being raped, beaten, or killed.

“Thank you.” Grateful tears flooded her eyes as she clasped her hands together beneath her chin. “Thank you so much.”

“What’ your name?” asked the woman.

“Lilly.” She dashed at her wet cheeks. “My name is Lilly.”

“And mine is Juliet. I’ll see you again soon, Lilly.” Then she was gone, leaving as silently as she’d appeared.

And Lilly was alone.

CHAPTER TWO

IF JULIET DIDN'T DIE, he was going to kill her.

Silently fuming at his sister's stupidity for getting herself tangled up with a Runner – and not just any Runner, but the bloody Wolf himself – Bran took the stairs two at a time. Below him the brawling ruckus had subsided to a dull roar as the sailors began to run out of steam. Drawing his pistol, he threw his shoulder into the first door he came to...and ran straight into an angel.

No, not an angel, he realized when he reached out to steady the ethereal creature and his hands closed around a real flesh and blood woman. Angels weren't real, and even if they were they sure as hell wouldn't be in a place like this. But damned if she didn't look just like one with her tangled mane of silver blonde hair and luminous violet eyes that were looking up at him with fear and mistrust.

Bran couldn't blame her for not trusting him. At just over six feet in height, he had the long, lithe build of a wolf and the sharp, aristocratic features of a nobleman. The son of an earl's daughter and an Irish blacksmith, he'd been born and raised in his father's homeland until the age of seven when his grandfather had tracked them down and forced his mother to return to England. A sweet, albeit fickle woman who desperately missed the life her poor husband

could not give her on his pittance of a salary, she'd agreed to return home so long as Bran could come as well.

For two blissful years Bran had the entire world at his fingertips... until his mother died of consumption and the earl, loving grandfather that he was, turned his grandson out on the streets with no more than a sack of bread and the clothes on his back.

'No filthy Irish half-breed shall ever inherit the Glenberry title', he had blustered as he'd sent Bran away, his face flushed with self-righteous anger and his piercing blue eyes filled with malice.

It struck Bran as wickedly ironic that he'd grown up to look just like the bastard. They shared the same piercing blue eyes, strong chin, and tousled mane of dirty blond hair – although the earl had fastidiously kept his covered beneath a white wig. Occasionally he wondered if the old man was still alive, but it was never more than a passing thought, there and gone again before he had time to dwell on it.

He supposed most men would have spent the rest of their lives trying to figure out a way back into the earl's good graces, or at the very least grow bitter with resentment. Not Bran. He may have been a filthy Irish half-breed, but he wasn't without his pride and he'd be damned to hell and back before he ever asked for so much as a single piece of copper from the man who had cast him out as if he were a mongrel dog.

"Easy love," he said soothingly, trying to ease some of the fear in the blonde angel's gaze. "I'm not going to hurt ye. I was just seeing if ye were all right. That was a hard tumble ye took." His deep, husky voice revealed a hint of the Irish he could add in or take out at will. At

a young age he'd learned women's knees went all wobbly for a bit of brogue and he wasn't above using it to get what he wanted. Which in this case was for the barmaid to stop looking at him as if he was going to snap her up in two tasty bites.

If she didn't look so bloody terrified he might have been tempted to do just that...if only to see if she tasted as delicious as she looked. But given that she appeared perilously close to fainting, he thought it best to keep his hands (and mouth) to himself.

At least for now, he thought silently, a roguish grin flitting across his countenance. It slowly faded into a concerned frown when he noted her pale cheeks and unblinking stare. Had she struck her head when they'd collided?

"I say, ye are lookin' a touch out of it." He lifted his hand. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

She blinked, and those brilliant violet eyes – the same exact color as an amethyst necklace he'd pinched two weeks ago from a townhouse in Grosvenor Square – refocused on his face. "Three," she said, winged brows gathering over the bridge of her nose. "I'm not blind."

"I never said ye were." He gave an easy shrug. "What's a lovely lass like ye doing in a place like this?"

"It's – it's a long story," she murmured, her chin tilting down as her cheeks turned a pretty pink that made him think of the cherry blossoms that filled Hyde Park every spring.

Everything about her was delicate and soft and dainty, from her willowy figure to her trembling bottom lip. There was an etherealness to her beauty he'd never seen before, at least not in the East End. She

should have been in a fancy drawing room sipping tea instead of cowering in one of the filthiest taverns in all of London.

“And a hard one, I’d imagine.” Filled with the sudden urge to take her out of this wicked place, he held out his hand. “Come on love,” he coaxed with a smile. “Let’s get ye somewhere safe.”

Bran was no one’s knight in shining armor. He didn’t slay dragons. He stole the gold the dragons were protecting. But damned if he didn’t want to slay whatever demons were haunting the tiny barmaid with the sad violet eyes.

She studied his hand, her gaze traveling across his calloused palm before she bit her lip and peered up at him beneath a sweep of pale lashes. “Are you going to rape me?” she asked matter-of-factly.

“Am I - no. *No.*” Shaken all the way down to his core, his jaw clenched and his eyes flashed a dangerous, icy blue as he thought of what must have happened – or almost happened – to provoke such a question. “I’m not in the habit of takin’ women against their will. Nor do I keep company with any men who do.” His gaze softened. “Ye don’t have to come with me if ye don’t want to. But I think ye would be a great deal better off if ye did.”

Bran did not consider himself an exorbitantly wealthy man, but he’d done well enough for himself over the years. While the townhouse he shared with Juliet was in the middle of St. Giles instead of a posh street bordering one of the parks, it had been completely renovated from top to bottom and there was no home finer in all the East End. If the barmaid went with him she would want for nothing. More importantly, she would never need fear for her safety again.

Bran may not have been a violent man by nature, but his reputation for protecting himself and his was well deserved. No one who wished to see their next sunrise would ever dare touch what he kept under his roof, whether it be a priceless emerald brooch...or a beautiful blonde-haired angel.

He couldn't say his actions were completely selfless. He desired the lass, and if they became lovers, well, then so be it. But he'd been true to his word. He wouldn't force her. Women were never *forced* into his bed. They went there willingly. Sometimes more than one at a time. And while they never stayed for very long, they always had a damned good time. He made sure of it.

"All right," she said quietly as she lowered her hand on top of his. "I'll go with you."

The spark of heat that flashed between them when they touched went straight to Bran's loins. Having never experienced anything like it before he stared down at their joined fingers in wonder before reflexively tightening his grip.

Mine. The single thought, as foreign to him as the brilliant flare of electricity had been, consumed his entire mind as he met her unblinking gaze. Her expression was composed, but he could feel the rapid beat of her pulse against the base of his wrist. Quick and slight as the flutter of a hummingbird's wings, it sped up when he raised her hand and grazed the back of it with his mouth. Her skin was silky soft and tasted like apricots that had been left out to ripen in the sun. He was tempted to nibble his way up her arm, but at her startled exhalation of breath he reluctantly lifted his head and gifted her with

a roguish grin.

“Apologies, love. You’re too beautiful tae resist.”

A tiny line of distress appeared in the middle of her forehead. “If you expect me to sleep with you for protection–”

“No,” he said immediately, shaking his head. “There are no expectations. Not to say I wouldn’t refuse ye if ye were so inclined to offer...” His voice trailed away as his grin deepened. Blushing, the barmaid looked past him at the wall.

“If we’re going to leave we – we should probably go now,” she murmured.

“Yer right.” Jules would just have to take care of herself. If she wound up in Newgate, well, it would be no less than she deserved for getting wrapped up with the likes of Grant Hargrave. He’d *told* her to leave the Runner alone, hadn’t he? Go to ground for a while, he’d said. Let things smooth over, he’d said. But of course she hadn’t listened. She *never* listened. Headstrong as a donkey, that one. Although in this case he preferred the term ass.

“Is there anything ye want to bring with ye?” he asked, looking around the tiny room.

“No,” the barmaid said softly.

“Are ye sure? It won’t be any trouble to grab it. Jest tell me where–”

“There’s nothing,” she interrupted, and for the first time he saw a flash of ire in the depths of her amethyst gaze. The small display of temper suited her far better than sadness, and revealed there was more to the little maid than met the eye. For all that she looked like a

stiff breeze would blow her sideways, he sensed strength and resilience beneath the fear.

“I have nothing,” she continued, and the weary bitterness in her voice squeezed at his heart.

“Well that’s not true, is it love?” Curving his arm around her tiny waist, he tucked her protectively against his side as they headed for the door. “Ye have me.”

CHAPTER THREE

HAVING LEARNED THE hard way just how deceptive a charming grin could be, Lilly knew better than to trust a scoundrel. Rakes and rogues, the lot of them. She'd never met a single one who wouldn't gleefully sell the dress off his mother's back if given half the chance, and yet...and yet there was something about *this* scoundrel in particular that made him different from the rest. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Maybe it was the fact that he could have easily taken advantage of her, but he hadn't. Or maybe it was the shocking jolt of sensation that had lit her entire body on fire when their hands touched. Or maybe she was just a desperate barmaid out of options. Whatever the reason, she found herself instinctively leaning closer to him as he quickly ushered her out of the Mermaid and down a narrow alley that stank of rotten food and piss.

"Where are we going?" she asked, shivering slightly when a cool breeze blew in off the Thames. This section of the East End ran parallel to the massive river, which was why it was littered with so many sailors. The large merchant ships that came into port were mostly carrying cotton and spices – the ones ferrying passengers across the pond deployed much further upriver – and it took a few

days to unload everything, during which time the sailors (having often been at sea for weeks if not months) took full advantage of having their feet back on dry land.

This time Lilly's shiver had nothing to do with the chill in the air and everything to do with the gleam in Jack's eyes when he'd dragged her up the stairs. Why did men have to be so cruel? With the exception of her father and Red, not a single one had ever treated her with genuine compassion. Instead they all saw her as something they could take. Something they could use and discard at their will, no matter that she clearly wasn't willing.

Even though it was foolish, sometimes she looked at her face in the mirror and wished she had been born with a bulbous nose and eyes that were too close together and pockmarked skin. Maybe then she wouldn't have caught the wandering eye of Doyle Pearson and she'd still be in Blooming Glen, snug in her bed instead of traipsing about a damp alley that smelled of human excrement while the sound of gunshots echoed in the air.

"Are ye cold?" Blue eyes flickering with concern, her scoundrel – for that was already how she'd come to think of him, having yet to learn his name – whisked off his greatcoat and draped it around her shoulders. The coat dwarfed her small frame and was so heavy she nearly sagged beneath its weight, but it was warm and smelled like him.

Cinnamon and cigars, she thought silently, her nose twitching as she inhaled his scent. An unusual combination, but one that was far better than the stench of sweat and gin she'd grown accustomed to.

“Thank you.” She dared a quick glance up at his countenance and then looked quickly away, as if he were an apparition that might vanish in a puff of smoke if she gazed at him for too long. Given how he’d treated her thus far, he might as well have been a ghost. Men were not kind here. They had no need to be. And yet this one, for reasons she could not possibly fathom, had shown her only kindness.

“We’re going to my townhouse. It isn’t far.” Gently grasping her elbow, he steered her to the left when the alley split into two. The further they walked from the Mermaid the quieter it became, until the only sounds were the slap of their shoes on the muddy cobblestones and the occasional pitter-patter of tiny rat paws as the fearless vermin scurried from one pile of trash to another.

“You live in St Giles, then.” Lilly’s heart sank. She’d hoped to escape the rookery once and for all, but she should have known better. It was a rare person who managed to get out of the squalor and the stink. Like quicksand, the harder you fought the deeper you sank.

“Aye.” Her scoundrel chuckled at her bleak expression. “But it’s a far better area than this. Ye aren’t fighting off rats, for one thing.” With startling swiftness he struck out with his right foot and a large black rat, easily the size of a cat, went sailing through the air with a furious hiss.

Lilly shuddered. “I never knew they could grow so big until I came here.”

“Why *did* ye come here love? Never mind,” he said, shaking his head before she could utter a word. “There’s time enough for that later. Let’s get ye some hot food and a soft bed. When yer feelin’ up to

it ye can tell me all about how a pretty lass like ye came to live in a place like this. I'm sure it's quite the story."

He had no idea.

"Me name's Bran, by the way. Bran Sullivan." He slanted her a sideways glance, the hint of a grin lifting one side of his mouth. There was a perpetual gleam of mischief in his eyes, as if he was always contemplating something naughty, like a boy on the verge of pulling a girl's pigtails. Lilly wouldn't mind if he pulled *her* hair, and the wicked thought instantly made her blush.

She wasn't a virgin. Doyle had seen to that. She'd known it was a sin to be intimate with a man before marriage, but she had been young and naïve and so utterly, foolishly blinded by love that she'd never even considered refusing him.

The first few times had been awkward and, if she were being honest, quite a bit painful. After that it had gotten better, but it was never something she looked forward to with much enthusiasm. Like folding the bed or sweeping the floor, lovemaking became a chore to be checked off an invisible list when Doyle came home from the gambling hells – staggered home, more like – and rolled on top of her.

A few thrusts, some grunts, and the deed was done. According to Jenny, another serving wench at the Mermaid, she ought to have been grateful it only lasted for a few minutes. But all she ever felt was a vague sense of disappointment.

Surely there had to be more to intimacy than what she'd experienced. And with Bran – the name, for all that it only had four letters, suited him perfectly – she had a niggling feeling there would

be. Not that she planned on finding out firsthand.

You've gone down that road before, she warned herself sternly. *For all his kindness, don't forget he's still a rogue.*

She wouldn't forget.

But that didn't mean she wasn't tempted.

"My name is Lilly." She snuck another shy peek at him from beneath her lashes. "Lilly James."

"Lilly. That's lovely, lass." The way he spoke her name – like a soft, velvet caress – sent a warm shiver rippling down her spine. Suddenly cognizant of just how near they were walking she shifted to the side, sliding free of his grasp as they rounded a corner and crossed an empty street.

She'd never ventured this far away from the Mermaid before and she was surprised to discover that even though they were still in St Giles (or at least she assumed they were, having no choice but to take Bran at his word) they'd left the worst of the rot and the decay back at the docks. The buildings, most of them brick, were still too close together and more than a few broken windows had been crudely boarded up, but there were no piles of trash or skittering rats.

When Bran led her past a wrought iron gate and up a series of stone steps to a narrow townhouse she stopped short, her eyes going wide. "*This* is where you live?"

A grimace flashed across his handsome countenance. "I know it's not much to look at from the outside, but—"

"It's *enormous*," she breathed, hardly able to believe her good fortune. She didn't know quite what she'd been expecting when Bran

had offered to take her to his home. A tiny flat. A room above a pub. A decrepit tenement on the verge of collapsing. But certainly not an entire house! The space – for one could hardly call it a bedroom – she’d shared with two other girls at the Mermaid had been so small and cramped it had been impossible to stand upright. By comparison, Bran’s home was a veritable palace.

“Aye.” Tossing a cocky grin over his shoulder, he lifted a brass key out of his pocket and unlocked the door. “That’s what all the ladies say. After ye, love.”

The long hem of his coat dragged behind her as she walked hesitantly into a large foyer with a vaulted ceiling and gleaming hardwood floors. The interior of the house was dimly lit, but after Bran locked the door behind them he made quick work of lighting the half dozen or so sconces hanging on the walls. Her mouth agape, Lilly turned in a slow circle, scarcely able to believe her eyes.

There was a parlor off to the left and a library to the right. A grand staircase led to the second floor which was divided into two hallways so long she couldn’t see the end of them. There were large paintings in gilt frames, furniture trimmed with mahogany, and not one, not two, but *three* crystal chandeliers! Having never seen such wealth before, she was almost stunned speechless by the sheer overwhelming opulence of it all.

Almost.

“Are you a duke?” she blurted, completing her circle to stare up at Bran in amazement. He smirked down at her, blue eyes bright with amusement.

“Hardly, love. But I make do. Here, let me help ye with yer coat.” His hands skimmed lightly down her arms, making her tremble with awareness as he removed the greatcoat and draped it over the back of a chair. “You’re about the same size as my sister. Ye can borrow some of her clothes until we get ye to the dressmaker’s.”

Lilly tugged self-consciously at her low cut bodice. She hated the serving gowns they had to wear at the Mermaid, but her only other dress – the one she’d brought with her all the way from Blooming Glen – was just one failed stitch away from falling to pieces. “I – I am afraid I don’t have any money.”

“That’s all right.” Bran shrugged easily, as if money was no object. “I know a dressmaker who owes me a favor. It won’t be any trouble at all to get ye a few new things.”

“Oh.” Hating the idea of charity – even if it was desperately needed – she bit her lip and looked down at the floor. “You – you really don’t have to. I’ll make do. Just allowing me to stay here is more than enough. Truly.”

Bran crossed his arms and rocked back on his heels. “Having a beautiful lass like ye dressed in a scrap of cloth like that is nothing short of a crime, love. As I don’t fancy a trip down to Bow Street, you’ll be doin’ us both a favor if ye let Old Bea make ye a dress or two. Given the sort o’ clientele she usually gets, I wouldn’t be surprised if *she* paid *us*.”

When he put it that way...

“Well...all right.” Lifting her chin in time to catch his triumphant grin, she wagged her finger at him. “But I only need one,” she said

sternly. “And I *will* pay you back.”

“As I said, Old Bea owes me. But if it makes ye feel better, I can think of a few ways ye can make it up to me.” His grin was so utterly wolfish that she didn’t know whether to laugh or pick up her skirts and flee in the opposite direction. Running was undoubtedly the wiser choice, but then she’d never made the best decisions where rakes were concerned.

Why start now?

Her breath caught when he stepped closer, his thumb brushing across her cheek as he tilted her head up. His grip wasn’t tight or restraining. She could have easily stepped back if she wanted to.

If being the operative word.

“What – what are you doing?” she whispered, her breath catching when he trailed the back of his hand along the curve of her jaw and down the side of her throat to where her pulse beat wildly. Every part of her body, from the top of her head to the tip of her toes, felt like it was humming...as if she were a finely tuned bowstring on the verge of being plucked by a very skilled musician.

Instinctively she knew that making love to Bran would not be the same as making love to Doyle. There was a connection between them. A *real* connection, not one forged by empty grins and meaningless flattery, but by raw physical attraction the likes of which she’d never experienced before.

The only question that remained was what they were going to do about it.

“You’ve the softest skin I’ve ever felt.” His hand trailed lower,

lingering on the exposed skin of one shoulder before slipping behind her back and sliding into her long mane of tangled hair. He rubbed a blonde tendril between his thumb and forefinger as he gazed down at her and her pulse began to race even faster when she saw the dark desire swirling in the depths of his gaze. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think ye were an angel sent from heaven above to tempt me.”

“An – an angel?” A soft laugh escaped her lips. “I am many things, but I’m afraid an angel is not one of them.”

“Are ye saying I’ve brought a sinner into my home?” His husky voice was as intoxicating as a glass of red wine. A fitting analogy, as she already felt well on her way to being inebriated. Everything around them was blurred. The floor. The ceiling. The walls. The only thing in focus was Bran. His disheveled mane of dusky gold hair. His ice blue eyes. His slightly crooked nose. His parted lips...

“I – I...” Embarrassed by her stammering, her gaze darted away as she imagined what those lips would feel like pressed against hers. Doyle’s kisses had always been wet and a bit sloppy. To be honest, she’d never particularly cared for them. But she had a feeling she would *very* much like the way Bran kissed.

What are you doing? Her head demanded, outraged by the traitorous direction of her thoughts. *You’ve gone down this road before, and look how it turned out! We haven’t come this far just to trade one rake for another.*

Why not? Her heart asked. After all, she was already damned to hell – her premarital affair had seen to that. So why not enjoy the ride on the way down? It wasn’t as if she could ruin herself any more than she

already had. And if she was going to sin, she might as well do it with someone worth sinning for.

There were worse things in life than being a handsome rogue's mistress. Not that Bran had said he wanted her as such, but really... why *else* would he go through all the trouble of bringing her here? But just as she was about to close her eyes and purse her lips, he abruptly stepped back and slid his hands into his pockets.

"Ye need to rest," he said gruffly, and for the first time since they'd met he looked away from her, his eyes unreadable as his gaze flicked to a painting hanging on the far wall. Were it not for the tension in his jaw she might have thought she'd dreamed his hand on her skin and his mouth a hair's breadth away from her own. Were she bolder she might have demanded to know why he'd stopped.

"It's been a long night," he continued, still not looking at her. "Let me show ye to your room, and I'll have the maid bring up a plate of food."

"Oh. All – all right, then." Not knowing whether she felt more relieved or disappointed, Lilly followed him up the stairs and down a long hallway to a dimly lit bedchamber. Like the rest of the house it was impressively large and handsomely appointed with a canopied bed, two parlor chairs set on either side of a dormant fireplace, a matching chaise lounge, a small table, and a writing desk complete with parchment and an inkwell. Clasp ing her hands together with sheer, unadulterated delight, she all but leapt past Bran, her skirts fluttering around her calves as she whirled in another circle.

"This – this is like something out of a dream." Like a child on

Christmas morning that didn't know which present to open first, she danced from one side of the room to the other, touching everything within reach. Stopping beside the bed, she fell back onto the soft coverlet with a giddy laugh, her feet kicking gleefully in the air. "I feel like a queen."

"There's never been a queen as beautiful as ye," Bran said quietly, and Lilly's heart gave a hard *thump* inside of her chest when she sat up on her elbows, hair spilling in a waterfall of silk down her back.

Bran's hungry gaze devoured her from across the room in one long, searching stare that left her skin flushed and her breath coming in short, uneven rasps. Quickly sitting all the way up, she crossed her arms over her chest and bit her lip, suddenly feeling for all the world as if she were a tiny rabbit...and Bran was a very large, very *hungry* wolf.

"T-thank you," she squeaked. "F-for everything."

"I'll send for the maid." He started to turn. A silvery beam of moonlight slipped in through the window, illuminating his clenched jaw and the hard line of his brow as he glanced back at her over his shoulder. "Sleep well, Lilly. Sweet dreams."

Then he was gone, but it was a long, long time before she fell asleep...and when she finally did succumb to slumber, her dreams were anything but sweet.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT THE BLOODY HELL was he doing?

Stalking across his bedchamber to the window, Bran yanked back the curtain and glared down at the street below. With the exception of a black alley cat stealthily climbing a stack of crates in search of a midnight meal, all was quiet. He started to let the curtain fall, but a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye stilled his hand.

It was Juliet, moving stealthily as the cat through the shadows. As if she sensed his gaze she suddenly stopped and looked up, her green-eyed stare going directly to the window. When she saw him standing on the other side of the glass she lifted her hand and gave a one-fingered salute which he promptly returned, followed by a relieved nod of his head.

So his little sister had managed to escape Newgate yet again. He was impressed, but not surprised. If there was anyone who could outwit Hargrave, it was Jules. Maybe this time she'd be smart enough to stay underground for a while. Because it was not a question of *if* she was going to get caught. It was a matter of *when*. And she was going through her nine lives faster than he cared to count.

No thief was infallible. Yeti had taught them that. All it took was one mistake, one left turn instead of a right, and they'd find

themselves dangling by the neck at high noon in Newgate Square. It was a gruesome fate Bran would not wish upon anyone, least of all Juliet.

She'd always been the more reckless of the two of them. The three of them, if he counted Edward. Which he didn't. Not anymore. Not since he'd walked into Juliet's bedroom and found Eddy pinning her down to the bed, his eyes filled with madness and gut-churning lust.

Bran did not like to think of that night often. When he did his hands still curled into fists and he smelled blood, metallic and wet. Had Juliet not pulled him back he would have beaten Edward to death, which would have been no less than the bastard deserved. Instead they'd banished him from London and had not heard hide nor hair from him in over four years. For his sake, Bran hoped he was dead. Because if he ever stepped foot in the city again he soon would be.

When Juliet disappeared around the front of the house Bran's thoughts immediately returned to Lilly. Or rather, to Lilly's breasts. He'd caught a glimpse of one dusky nipple when she'd thrown herself back on the bed and it had lit a fire in him that was still smoldering.

God, what he wouldn't have given for a taste of her. Just one long, hot, lingering taste. Unfortunately, he'd come to his senses just as he had been about to kiss her. And even though he could have sworn he had seen a flash of disappointment in her heavy-lidded gaze, he'd been determined to honor his word.

Bran was not a good man. He'd lied and cheated. He'd broken hearts (although never on purpose). He'd stolen. Only the devil himself knew how much. But one thing he'd never done was take

advantage of a woman.

It would have been child's play to lure Lilly into his bed. He knew she was attracted to him. He'd seen it in her eyes. Heard it in the quiet catch of her breath. Felt it in the rapid flutter of her pulse. He could have taken her in an instant if he'd wanted to. And bollocks, had he wanted to. But when he made love to her – for there was no longer any 'if' about it – she wouldn't be swaying on her feet from exhaustion and hunger.

The poor lamb had been one step away from collapsing where she stood. He couldn't begin to imagine the trials she'd been forced to endure, nor how she'd managed to survive for this long. Some women – like Jules – were born and bred for the East End. They'd been raised from birth on a steady diet of violence and deceit. But Lilly, sweet Lilly with the violet eyes and shy little smile, wasn't one of them. It was a miracle she'd managed to last this long, and he shuddered to think of what might have happened to her if their paths hadn't crossed when they did.

The lovely did not last long in St Giles. If they were not murdered outright, they became bitter and hard and filled with resentment. But not Lilly.

Lilly was soft and kind. She was everything good in a world filled with darkness and despair. Her light may have been dimmed by whatever ills had befallen her, but it wasn't extinguished and the glow of it pulled him to her like a moth to flame.

He'd desired other women before, but not like this.

Never like this.

The need to touch her, to kiss her, to claim her as his own pulsed in his blood. It drove him out into the hallway and all the way to her bedchamber before he stopped short, his hand hovering above the doorknob as he realized what he was on the verge of doing. With a vicious curse he turned and walked away, his jaw clenched and his bollocks aching.

He found Juliet in the kitchen helping herself to a plate of leftover scones courtesy of their part-time cook. With just the two of them living in the townhouse it didn't make sense to employ an entire staff, so they made do with a cook and a scullery maid. Money well spent, in Bran's opinion, as Jules couldn't cook worth a damn and he wasn't after doing his own laundry.

"Save one of those for me, will ye?" He pulled up a chair beside the table while Juliet divided the scones onto two plates. Slapping one down in front of him, she hopped up on the worktop and balanced the other on her lap.

"I thought you'd still be out in a pub somewhere." Twisting her long auburn curls up into a bun, Juliet made quick work of the first scone and started on the second. For such a tiny slip of a thing she'd always had an enormous appetite, often leading Bran to wonder if she didn't have a hollow leg.

"Change of plans." Not really hungry, but needing something to do with his hands, he began to pick his scone apart. "I'm glad to see ye aren't in irons. Would've been a pain in the arse to break ye out of Newgate."

"Please." She rolled her eyes. "There's not a Runner alive fast

enough to catch me. Not even the Wolf.”

“But ‘e came close,” Bran noted with a sly grin as his gaze flicked down to her neck where the skin was red and irritated. Having left the same marks on many a woman, he knew precisely what they were. “Or else ye wouldn’t have those whisker burns.”

“Sod off.” Scowling, she tugged up her collar. “It’s none of your damn business.”

“It’ll be my damn business when all of Bow Street comes pounding on our door. Bloody hell, Jules.” He shook his head in disbelief. “What the devil are you thinking, knockin’ boots with a Runner? Ye might as well have dangled a piece of meat in front of a lion.”

“We weren’t *knockin’ boots*.” Setting her plate aside with a clatter, she crossed her arms and glared down her nose at him. “And do you think I’d really be stupid enough to lead him back here? I lost him all the way back at Blackfriars Bridge. It’s impossible for him to have tracked me this far.”

“Maybe not tonight, but what about the next time? Or the time after that?” He drummed his fingers on the table. “It’s a dangerous game you’re playing, Jules.”

“Perhaps,” she acknowledged, “but it’s my game to play.”

“Not when the consequences effect the both of us.” What would happen to Lilly if he was taken by the Runners? She’d be safe for a week, maybe two. But eventually word would get out that he was in Newgate and vultures would descend on the house like a black plague, stealing anything that wasn’t nailed down...including Lilly. “Ye need to take a step back, Jules. I’m serious this time.”

Stuffing a piece of scone into her mouth, she mumbled something incoherent under her breath.

“Chew and then talk. Bloody hell.” Now he was the one who rolled his eyes. “Ye would think ye had been raised in a barn.”

“I *said* you’re right.” She glared at him, fiery green eyes daring him to mock her. “The Runners are becoming a nuisance. Hargrave in particular. I’m not going to give up thieving. It’s who I am. But maybe...maybe it’s time I kept my head down and only did small jobs for a while.”

“Or no jobs at all,” Bran suggested mildly. He was tempted to toss in a smug ‘I told you so’, but as Jules was known to throw a vicious uppercut and he fancied his nose where it was, thank ye very much, he wisely kept his mouth shut.

“No jobs?” Juliet looked at him as if he’d just sprouted a second head. “As in stop stealing? All together?”

“All together,” he confirmed.

Her face paled. “But...but what would I *do*?”

For some thieves, stealing was more than a way of life. It *was* their life. While Bran had never let his occupation define him, he knew his sister took immense pride in being known as the best jewel thief in all of London. Once that title had belonged to their friend Felix Spencer, but after he’d been captured by the Runners (and subsequently became a Runner himself to escape a lifetime of imprisonment) the crown had been passed to Juliet. She wore it as proudly as any queen, and he knew what giving it up would mean to her. Just as he knew what would happen if she didn’t.

“Travel. Help Yeti at the shop.” As a legitimate front for fencing stolen goods Yeti ran Ginny’s Antiquities, named after...well, come to think of it, Bran hadn’t the faintest idea where the old goat had gotten the name. “Take up sewing.”

“*Sewing?*” Juliet’s nose wrinkled in disgust. “I’d rather pluck out my eyes with a dull spoon.”

“Lots of women sew. It’s supposed to be relaxing.”

“I think you mean boring. I suppose I could help Yeti. God knows he needs it. Have you been in Ginny’s lately? The place is a mess. Which reminds me.” She tapped her chin thoughtfully. “I need to tell Yeti he’s going to be hiring a new employee.”

Kicking his chair back, Bran crossed his arms behind his head. “Is that so?”

“Aye. One of the barmaids from the Mermaid found herself in a spot of trouble. Two sailors had her upstairs in a room by herself. I’ll let you guess what they were trying to do. I shot one in the arm.”

He tipped forward with a sigh. “What ‘ave I told ye about going around shooting people?”

“The bastard deserved it,” she said defensively. “You should have seen the girl’s face. The poor thing was terrified. I’m just lucky I found her when I did. God knows what those brutes would have done to her.” She cursed under her breath. “Why do men have to be such arseholes?”

“What was her name? The barmaid,” he clarified, looking at Juliet intently. The odds of them both meeting Lilly on the same night were astronomical, and yet...

“Lilly. Why?” she asked curiously.

“I’ll be damned,” he murmured.

“Do you know her?”

“Ye could say that. She’s upstairs sleeping.”

Juliet’s eyes widened. “Lilly is *here*? How the devil did that happen?”

“I was looking for ye and I found her. What?” he said when his sister smirked. “I couldn’t very well leave her there, could I? You said it yourself. The lass was terrified.”

“And you just had to swoop in, dashing hero that you are.”

“What’s that supposed mean?” he demanded.

“Don’t pretend like this is the first woebegone female you’ve dragged home. You’re like the Pied Piper of busty tavern wenches.”

“The hell I am,” he scowled. Pied Piper of busty tavern wenches. He’d never heard anything so bloody ridiculous in his entire life.

“What about the prostitute you brought home two weeks ago?” Juliet asked, lifting a brow. “The one with the black eye. What was her name? Mindy or Maggie...”

“Molly,” he said between gritted teeth. “Her name was Molly.”

“That’s right. And before her it was the French actress...Bianca or Bridgette or something or rather. I still don’t know how you managed that one. She didn’t speak a *word* of English.”

“For what we were doing she didn’t have to.” His scowl faded and was replaced with a roguish grin as he recalled the fiery brunette who had burned up his bedsheets for three memorable days before leaving London with her theater group. “And her name was Babette.” His

brow creased. "I think."

Truth be told he really *hadn't* been able to understand a single word Bianca/Bridgette/Babette had spoken, but then again he hadn't needed to. Their short-lived relationship had been purely physical. There had been no emotion. No promises. Just simple, all-consuming pleasure. Exactly how he liked it.

Bran made no apology for his affairs and he wasn't about to start now. As long as both parties understood the rules, what was the harm? The women he slept with knew he wasn't about to get down on bended knee and pledge his love. Nor did he expect – or want – the same from them. To date, his longest affair had lasted just shy of four months. Any longer and he inevitably began to grow bored. But he always made certain his mistresses were well compensated for their time, and with the exception of a few tears and tantrums when it came time to end things, he'd not had any complaints.

He supposed eventually he'd like to get married and have a few squalling brats. Settle down in a nicer part of town and live the quiet, distinguished life of a reformed rake. But that was so far in the future it didn't even bear thinking about.

"Have you slept with her yet?" Eying his scone, Juliet jumped down off the worktop and sidled up to the table, but when she made a grab for his plate he yanked it out of reach.

"Keep your bloody paws to yourself. I'm not done."

"Not done? You've hardly eaten a bite!"

"Just because I don't inhale my food doesn't mean I'm not going to eat it." To prove his point he popped a sliver of scone in his mouth

and made a show of chewing it. He and Juliet may not have been brother and sister by blood, but that didn't stop him from teasing her unmercifully whenever he had the chance. "Mmmm," he said, smacking his lips. "Delicious."

"You're such an arse, Bran. I'm going upstairs."

"Don't wake Lilly." His chair scraped against the floor as he stood up. "She needs her rest."

"I wasn't planning on it." Her head tilted to the side, green eyes narrowing as they searched his face. "Have a care with this one, will you? She's different from the regular tramps and trollops you usually bring home."

"Sod off. I've never brought a trollop home in my entire life." True, the women he consorted with were generally more *experienced* than the average lass, but that didn't make them a trollop.

It made them good in bed.

"And I'm the Duchess of Kensington. Mind your manners, Bran."

"I always mind my manners," he said, vaguely insulted Juliet would imply otherwise.

She shook her head. "That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

CHAPTER FIVE

LILLY WOKE TO the faint pattering of rain against the window. For a few precious moments she closed her eyes and allowed herself to lay perfectly still, knowing that she'd soon be on her feet for the rest of the day and wouldn't be back in her bed until the wee hours of the morning.

It was ironic to think that something she'd once taken for granted was now considered a luxury. When she'd lived with her parents she had been allowed to sleep in as late as she wanted and no one had bothered her. Well, that wasn't completely true. Her little sister Abigail – known as Abby to her family and friends – had loved nothing better than to come running into Lilly's room just as the sun was beginning to rise.

How Lilly had *hated* to be awoken by cold feet pressing into the small of her back and Abby's bright, energetic voice chirping away in her ear. Now she would happily give anything to be woken by her sister again.

Finally, with a long, heavy sigh, she sat up, stretching her arms above her head...and froze with them in midair, eyes widening as she abruptly remembered where she was.

Not at the Mermaid in a tiny cramped room hardly bigger than a

broom closet, but in the house of a man she'd only met last night! A man she knew absolutely nothing about. Although that wasn't completely true, was it?

She may not have known what he did or where he came from, but she knew his name and the color of his eyes. She knew the sound of his laughter and the feel of his touch. She knew he had been kind when she'd desperately needed kindness, and for that she would always be grateful.

But she wasn't about to make the same mistake twice.

Trust a rogue once, shame on him.

Trust a rogue twice, shame on you.

Scrambling off the bed Lilly looked frantically around for her clothing, but the despised serving dress was nowhere to be seen. The maid must have taken it after she'd dropped off a nightgown and a silver tray filled with light refreshments. Lilly had been too tired to eat anything the night before, but her growling stomach prompted her to take a biscuit off the tray and stuff the entire thing in her mouth as she searched in vain through the closets and antique mahogany wardrobe for something to wear.

She needed to leave before Bran returned, but she could hardly go outside in nothing more than a shift and a nightgown! No matter that it was the prettiest thing she'd worn in months. The simple white frock may have been plainly adorned with lace trim and long sleeves, but in comparison to her serving dress it felt like a ball gown.

At last, folded away in the far back corner of a dresser, she found a dark gray cloak. It was masculine in design and several sizes too big

for her petite frame, but it was better than nothing. However, no sooner had she swung it over her shoulders and drawn up the hood than she heard a quiet knock at the door.

“Lilly?” Bran’s deep voice flowed effortlessly through the wood.
“Are ye awake? I’ve brought ye breakfast.”

“I...” She bit the inside of her cheek, gaze darting to the window as she contemplated a quick escape. She couldn’t say why she felt a sudden urgency to flee. Especially when she’d been so receptive to Bran’s charms the night before. But perhaps that was precisely the problem. She was too receptive and he was too charming. Much, much too charming. And in the clear light of day, with a clear head and a subdued heart, she recognized her folly at having allowed herself to be lured in by yet another rake.

“Lilly?”

“Yes,” she said with great reluctance. “I’m awake.”

Thank him for his help and be on your way, she told herself sternly, hands knotting behind her back as she watched the doorknob slowly turn. *Don’t dally, don’t linger, and whatever you do...do not kiss him!*

“I wasn’t sure what ye like, so I’ve brought ye a bit of everything.” Bran walked into the room carrying a platter with enough food on it to feed a small army. He stopped short at the sight of her, one tawny eyebrow lifting as he took note of her oversized cloak and guilty expression. “Going somewhere?”

“No, I just...Yes,” she admitted sheepishly, biting her bottom lip. “To be quite honest, I was hoping to be gone before I saw you this morning.”

He carefully set the platter down on the small table in front of the window. She inwardly braced herself for his anger, but instead she saw nothing but understanding in his clear blue gaze when he turned to face her. “Then I’m glad I caught ye before ye left. Ye don’t want to be traveling about the city on an empty stomach. Toast with apricot?” Sliding a square piece of bread lathered with orange jam onto a small round plate, he held it out to her with all the gentle coaxing of a groom trying to win the favor of a head shy filly. “It’s still warm from the oven.”

Lilly didn’t need to be asked twice. While the road to most women’s hearts was paved with gold and diamonds, she’d always had a weakness for pastries. Or any food, for that matter. Particularly since the fare at the Mermaid left much to be desired.

“Ohhh.” The single syllable came out as a long moan of pleasure as the apricot jam melted on her tongue. Relishing the sweet, tangy flavor she didn’t notice the way Bran’s eyes suddenly darkened, or the tension that radiated through his jaw when he clenched his teeth. “I can’t remember the last time I tasted something as good as this.” Her tongue flicked out, swiping at a drop of apricot on her bottom lip before it could fall to her chin. “Did you make it yourself?”

“No,” he said roughly. “We have a part-time cook.”

“We?” The jam soured as Lilly’s stomach fell. Was Bran married? He hadn’t mentioned a wife last night...but then she hadn’t asked. Maybe he had a mistress, or a lover, or—

“My sister, Jules. We live here together. Her bedroom is at the other end of the hall.”

That's right. He'd mentioned his sister last night, but she'd been so tired she must have forgotten. Her breath escaping on a long, relieved breath, Lilly finished the rest of the toast and brushed the crumbs from her fingertips. "I see. And your parents?"

"Both dead. It's all right, love." His teeth flashed in a grin at her horrified gasp. "They passed a long time ago. No, it's just me and Jules. Ye actually met her last night at the Mermaid."

Lilly's brow creased. "I did?"

"Aye. Tiny lass. Green eyes. Red hair. Dresses like a lad."

"Oh!" She blinked in astonishment. Her rescuer, the one who had shot the sailor and prevented her rape, was Bran's *sister*? But... "You look nothing alike. I never would have guessed you were related."

"That's because we're not." At her confused look, Bran chuckled and gestured towards the table. "Why don't ye have a seat and finish your breakfast. It's a bit of a long story." Waiting until she'd filled her plate to the brim with three strips of savory bacon, two poached eggs, and another slice of apricot toast, he sat down across from her, long legs stretching all the way under the table to rest comfortably on either side of her chair.

He'd changed his clothes, she noted belatedly, and taken a bath, for his mane of golden hair was damp and slightly curled at the ends. He had also taken a straight razor to his jaw, although trimming his side whiskers had done nothing to detract from his roguish appeal. If anything he was even *more* handsome than he'd been yesterday, and as a flicker of heat unfurled between her thighs she hastily directed her gaze down to her plate.

“So...er...how did you and Jules meet?” Unable to stop herself, she snuck a quick glance at his face. He smiled innocently, as if he hadn’t the faintest idea how attractive she found him, but the glint in his eye was pure wickedness. Flustered, her hand jerked and she accidentally dropped her fork. It bounced off the table and clattered to the floor, landing directly between her feet.

“Oh.” Her cheeks burning a bright, brilliant red, she pushed her chair back. “I’ll get it.”

But as quick as she was Bran was quicker, and when she reached for the fallen utensil he snatched it out of her grasp. Their heads were bent so close together beneath the table she could see the steady throb of his pulse and smell the coffee on his breath. Her breath caught when he reached out with his hand and slowly tucked a loose tendril behind her ear, and it took all the self-preservation she possessed not to close her eyes and lean into his touch like a flower reaching up towards the sun.

“I’ll fetch ye another fork.” His voice broke the spell, and with a hard blink she sat back on her heels as he stood up and walked out of the room.

By the time he returned she’d found her composure, and she accepted the new utensil with a quietly murmured, “Thank you.”

“Yer welcome. Now, where was I?” Lounging back in the chair, he crossed his legs at the knee and fixed her with a grin that would have made the devil swoon.

“You were about to tell me how you and your sister met.” She cut off a piece of bacon. “Is Jules a nickname? Because when she

introduced herself she said her name was—”

“Juliet. Aye, that it is. But only to those she trusts with ‘er life.” And then, while Lilly listened, her new fork completely forgotten, Bran went on to tell her all about his life as a young boy growing up on the streets of St Giles. When he’d finally finished she could only shake her head, stunned by everything she’d just learned. And she’d thought *her* past was interesting!

Never in a million years would she have dreamed she was sitting across the table from one of the most prolific jewel thieves in all of London. To be honest, she wasn’t quite sure how she felt about it. Stealing was both illegal *and* immoral. But nothing in the East End was black or white, especially not handsome rogues with an endless abundance of charm.

“And you really won this house in a card game?” she asked, glancing around.

“I did, although at the time it was nothin’ more than a falling down heap of boards. Ye wouldn’t even recognize it. Took almost a year to get it up to snuff. We decided to leave the outside looking as it does on purpose, to dissuade criminals and the like.”

“Yes,” she murmured as she picked up her toast and took a tiny bite. “Wouldn’t want any criminals in the house.”

Bran’s smile was slow to spread, but when it did she felt the warmth of it all the way across the table. “Why Lilly me lamb, did ye just make a joke?”

She supposed she had. Her first in a very, very long time. Still not feeling completely comfortable with everything Bran had just revealed

about himself and Juliet, she shifted restlessly in her chair, her eyes dropping from his amused gaze to her plate. “Do you...that is to say, during one of your...er...*jobs*...have you ever hurt anyone?”

“That’s two different questions, isn’t it?” Claspings his hands behind his head, he regarded her with a steady, unblinking stare. “If ye are askin’ if I’ve ever harmed anyone in the act of snatching a pretty piece, the answer is no. I’m a thief, not a thug. Most of the houses I rob are empty, and if I hear someone coming I hop out the nearest window. I’m not after a fight.”

Relief coursed through her. Stealing was still wrong, of course, but it was reassuring to know that Bran never hurt his victims, only their purse strings. And it wasn’t as if they couldn’t afford to lose what he took. She was sure it was a nuisance, having a favorite piece of jewelry taken, but the lords and ladies he stole from were not exactly in danger of going hungry. “That’s very good to—”

“But,” he cautioned, holding up a finger, “that’s not to say I ‘aven’t knocked a bloke out cold who deserved it.”

“Oh,” she said faintly, her gaze dropping to his fists.

“I’m not a violent man, Lilly, if that’s what yer askin’.” He leaned forward until his elbows were touching the edge of the table. The affable charm was gone from his gaze, and without it he looked... hard. Dangerous. Menacing. The sort of man you would not want to come across in a dark alley late at night. “But I protect what’s mine, no matter the cost, and I’m not above shedding blood to do it.”

A shiver coursed through her. Kind? Had she really thought Bran was kind? There was nothing *kind* about him now. Then he smiled,

and the rigid line between his brows softened, and he reached across the table to gently cover her hand with his.

“I would never hurt ye, Lilly.” His blue eyes searched her face, probing gently at the wall she’d painstakingly built around her heart brick by brick. “I hope ye know that.”

Bran wouldn’t hurt her *physically*. That she believed. But there were a hundred different ways to hurt someone. A hundred different ways to leave them gasping for air, feeling for all the world as if their life was over. A hundred different ways to send them reeling, not from the strike of a hand but from the slice of a careless word.

Bruises healed. With time, the angry colors slowly faded until it was as if they’d never been there at all. But words...cruel, callous, vicious words stayed with a person.

Maybe not right on the surface. If one was lucky, the sting of them would fade as bruises did. But they would never disappear completely. For once spoken, a word could never be erased. And it was those words, those horrible words, awful, gut-wrenching words, that Lilly feared the most.

Words that were only a memory away.

‘You’re pathetic.’ Doyle’s cold eyes swept dispassionately over her as she laid in a trembling heap on top of their bed, her eyes glassy with tears and her hands pressed to her cheek, the skin beneath flushed a deep, angry red. ‘Stop caterwauling. You sound like a damn cat in heat.’

‘You – you hit me.’ It wasn’t the first time he’d lost his temper and struck out with his fists, but he’d promised – had sworn up and down on his dear mother’s grave – it would never happen again.

'I know.' He raked a hand through his brown hair. *'I'm sorry, Lilly. I shouldn't have raised my hand.'* His lips thinned. *'But you know what happens when you provoke me. You think by now you'd know better to mind your tongue when I'm in a mood.'*

She did know better. But as of late he was always in a mood and no matter what she said or did, she couldn't seem to appease him.

'All I asked was if there was any money left for food.' Her slender fingers dug into the sheets, anchoring herself to the bed. *'We haven't eaten in two days—'*

'I know how long it's been,' he snapped, and she cowered when he advanced a step, his face as dark as the storm clouds brewing outside the window of their pitifully small, rat-infested flat. 'Where do you think I was all night? Trying to win back our money while you lazed around doing nothing'.

Her shoulders stiffened. 'That's not fair, Doyle. I've been trying to find work—'

'And have you found any?' he jeered.

'Not yet, but—'

'Of course you haven't.' He dismissed the countless miles she'd walked and the doors she'd knocked on and the people she'd talked to – the people she'd begged – with a careless flick of his wrist. *'Because you have no skills, Lilly. In or out of the bedroom'. His eyes rolled when fresh tears brimmed on her lashes. 'If I knew you were this hopeless I never would have brought you to London.'*

He'd walked out the door a few days later and never returned, leaving her with bills she couldn't pay and rent she couldn't afford.

Hopeless, homeless, and hungry, she'd taken to the streets...and eventually found her way to the Mermaid.

If only she had listened to her parents when Doyle first came to call! They'd known from the first moment they met him that he wasn't to be trusted. But she'd been young, and headstrong, and desperate to discover what life was like outside of Blooming Glen. So she'd learned the hard way what happened when a naïve innocent gave her heart to a rake.

It was a lesson she did not care to repeat...and one she couldn't help but think about as she glanced down at Bran's large hand covering her smaller one. His thumb brushed across her knuckles, the rough pad slowly tracing each peak and valley.

"Where did ye go, love?" he asked quietly.

"To a place I don't care to visit ever again." She tried to pull her hand away but his grip tightened. For an instant he held her in place, those perceptive blue eyes searching hers for all of the secrets she was desperately hiding before he sighed and stood up, his long, sinewy arms stretching up towards the ceiling.

His shirt lifted, exposing several inches of bronzed skin and a line of hair that started beneath his navel and disappeared into the waistband of his trousers. She swallowed convulsively as she imagined where that hair led. She'd never much enjoyed touching Doyle down *there*, but again she wondered if it wouldn't be different with Bran.

Would he be a careless lover, or a considerate one? Would she wish for it to hurry up and be over, or will it to last for hours and hours? Would he use his mouth and hands to caress every inch of her body

until she was moaning his name, or simply take what he wanted and roll away?

“–is a heavy burden to carry, love. You’d do better to let it go.”

“I...What?” Realizing he’d been speaking while she’d been openly staring, Lilly blinked and forcibly dragged her gaze up from his muscular abdomen. “I’m sorry. I – I must have been daydreaming. I didn’t hear what you said.”

One side of his mouth lifted in a knowing smirk. “Is that what ye call it? Daydreaming?”

“Yes.” Her hands fluttered down into her lap where they twisted into an anxious knot of frayed nerves and suppressed sexual desire. “It is a poor habit of mine. I apologize.”

“Yer speech is different than it was in the Mermaid.” His head canted to the side. “Ye speak like a fancy highborn lady.”

“I’m not,” she said quickly. “A lady, that is. But when I was working I thought it best to talk like the other girls so as not to draw attention to myself.”

“So ye weren’t born in London?”

“No. I was raised in a tiny village two days from here. I’m certain you’ve never heard of it.”

“Yer probably right, seeing as I’ve never left the city.”

Her lips parted in surprise. “You’ve *never* left London?”

“Why would I, when I’ve everything I need right here? Food. Entertainment.” His eyes gleamed. “Beautiful women.”

“Yes, well, I...um...thank you for breakfast. And for letting me stay the night.” *And for making me think about kisses and lovemaking and all*

sorts of naughty things I have absolutely no business thinking about. “But I really should be going.”

“Have ye ever been to Hyde Park?” He stepped behind her to pull back her chair as she stood up.

“Have I...?” Puzzled by the unexpected question, she flicked a startled glance at him over her shoulder only to discover he was standing so close they were all but touching. One inadvertent step back and she would be in his arms, her head resting against his chin, her spine curving into his chest, her bottom pressing against...*oh*. Was it her imagination, or had that part of his body just gotten a tiny bit bigger?

Eyes wide, she whipped her head back around and drew in a deep breath as a wave of heat trickled between her breasts. Filled with blood and desire, her nipples puckered and swelled against her bodice, a wickedly foreign sensation that had her squirming in place.

Crossing her arms tightly over her chest in an awkward attempt to conceal her budding arousal, she quickly fled to the other side of the table and plunked herself down in Bran’s chair.

Heavens! What was *wrong* with her? She’d never had these...feelings with Doyle before, or any other man for that matter. It reminded her of when she’d caught fever as a child. She had gone to bed perfectly fine only to wake with blotchy red skin, a perspiring brow, and aching limbs. The change had been bewildering, especially to a young girl of seven years, and it was no less confusing now.

“Cat got yer tongue, love?” Bran asked, and Lilly blushed when she realized he was still waiting for an answer to his question.

Right.

Hyde Park.

“No, I-I’ve never been.” But she’d always wanted to go. In fact, it was the very first place she’d wanted to visit when she and Doyle first arrived in London. He’d promised they would take a carriage ride down one of the winding paths, but of course they never had. “Maybe someday,” she said softly, an unmistakable touch of wistfulness in her voice.

“Why not today?” he said with a dazzling smile she was helpless to resist.

“I...I suppose that would be all right.” Lilly knew she would have been much better served to go immediately to the antiques store Juliet had told her about and ask for a job, but she really *did* want to see Hyde Park and besides, what was a few more hours in Bran’s company? It wasn’t as if she was going to fall head over heels in love with him in *one* afternoon. He may have looked and acted like Prince Charming, but if she’d learned anything over the past two years it was that while princes made perfectly suitable bedtime reading material, they were notoriously underwhelming in real life.

“Excellent.” Bran’s smile deepened into a grin. “I’ll send the maid in with a change of clothes.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.” She worried her bottom lip, as uncomfortable with charity as she was with the sticky residue of heat clinging to the inside of her thighs. “My dress will be perfectly fine-”

“I wouldn’t ask a beggar to wear that sorry excuse for a pile of rags.” His eyes flashed a deep, tumultuous blue. “And I won’t have ye

reminded of that bloody tavern ever again. Jules has more dresses than she knows what to do with, although God knows why when she's happiest traipsing about in trousers. She won't mind ye borrowing one. In fact, I'm sure she would insist on it."

"Still, I don't."

"Accepting kindness doesn't have to be a sign of weakness, love. Sometimes it can be someone's greatest source of strength."

At his words, so gently spoken, Lilly felt a crack in the wall she'd built around her heart. It was followed by another, and another. Warmth seeped between the cracks, shining light on a part of her soul that had been dark and dormant for far too long.

Unable to speak past the painful lump that had gathered in her throat, she simply nodded and Bran, understanding far more than she wished he would, walked quietly out of the room.

Oh Lilly, she thought as the door closed and tears born of hope and despair gathered in her eyes. What on earth have you gotten yourself into?

CHAPTER SIX

SEEING HYDE PARK through Lilly's eyes was like seeing it for the first time.

As their rented curricule trotted leisurely down a winding, tree-lined path, she constantly turned this way and that, her brilliant violet eyes reflecting a child's delight in everything they passed, no matter how small or insignificant it seemed to Bran.

A gnarled, twisted dogwood in full bloom was regarded as a thing of wonder. Two ducks waddling down towards one of the park's many ponds were cheered. She stared open-mouthed at a gleaming black barouche with a duke's gold insignia, and couldn't quite contain her gasp of excitement when a doe bounded across the lane right in front of them.

"It's all so *beautiful*." A contented smile curving her perfect pink lips, Lilly leaned back with a blissful sigh and, closing her eyes, tipped her face to the sky. "Don't you think so, Bran?"

"Aye," he agreed, although he wasn't looking at the scenery.

Dappled sunlight danced across the light dusting of freckles on Lilly's nose and made her hair glisten like spun gold. A loose tendril clinging teasingly to her exposed collarbone drew his gaze down to her bosom. Framed in scalloped white lace her breasts were pretty as

a picture and his hands tightened on the reins, inadvertently causing the team of matching bays to toss their heads as he imagined burrowing his head between those two sweet globes.

She was as fetching a lass as he'd ever seen. A truly natural beauty, in every sense of the word. There was nothing artificial about her. Nothing portrayed or contrived. Her innocence was as refreshing as a cool misting rain after a hot summer's day and he wanted nothing more than to drench himself in her. But it was *because* of her innocence that he held himself back. As loathe as he was to admit it, Jules had been right. Lilly was nothing like the women he usually consorted with and he needed to be careful with her, both physically and emotionally

He'd seen the flash of torment in her eyes during breakfast. Someone had hurt her. Badly. Were it in his power, he would have erased the pain from her past. Barring that, he could only vow to protect her in the present.

Even if that meant protecting her from himself.

"It's hard to imagine we're still in London." Lilly opened her eyes. Somewhere between the dogwood and the ducks she'd lost her nervous stutter and the tension in her shoulders had finally eased, affording Bran a rare glimpse at the carefree girl she must have been before St. Giles had sank its vicious claws into her tender flesh.

It was impossible to live in the East End and not put up some kind of armor. Without it, a person wouldn't last more than fortnight and Lilly, for all that she appeared delicate and malleable, had managed to survive a lot longer than most women in her position would have. But

surviving wasn't living, and if there was anyone who deserved to live their life to its fullest it was Lilly.

She deserved silk on her skin and sunshine on her face. Ribbons in her hair and jewels on her fingers. And if there was anyone who knew jewels, it was him.

Amethyst to match her eyes, he mused, slanting a sideways glance in her direction. She'd twisted away from him, her small hands clinging to the side of the curricule as they sailed past a trio of ladies carrying lace-trimmed parasols. *And diamonds to complement her porcelain skin. A necklace, perhaps. Three tiers of glittering diamonds with an amethyst pendant resting at the apex of those lovely breasts.*

And nothing else.

Sensing his stare – if not his lascivious thoughts – Lilly turned back to face him, hands settling gracefully in her lap. Were it not for her lack of gloves and the curling tendrils of hair that had escaped her hastily composed coiffure she would have looked no different from the ladies they'd just passed. Her refined features, coupled with her svelte frame and quiet manner, could have easily adorned any drawing room in Grosvenor Square. To know that such rare beauty had been wasted on a bunch of drunken sailors and wastrels was enough to make Bran's blood boil. She never should have had to step within one mile of The Lusty Mermaid, and if it were up to him she never would again.

"Do you come here often?" she asked.

"To the park?" As they approached a steep turn he pulled back on the reins and the bays slowed to an animated walk, their iron shoes striking the hard stone in a steady rhythm. "Ye know, I can't

remember the last time.” One side of his mouth quirked in a wicked half grin. “Although I’m certain I’ve never ridden in a carriage with such sweet company.”

“Is this how you charm all of your women?” For once she didn’t blush and look away, but instead met his gaze with a challenging lift of one finely arched brow. “By making them believe they’re the prettiest, most *stunning* female you’ve ever met?”

“Aye,” he admitted shamelessly.

“I thought as much.”

“But in your case it’s true. It is,” he insisted when she gave an indelicate snort. “I wouldn’t lie, lass. Not to ye. ‘Tis true I’ve spent time with women who were more...generously endowed...but not a single one of them had your grace and natural beauty.”

She shook her head in bemusement. “I’m just a serving wench.”

“Ye *were* a serving wench,” he corrected. “But that’s what ye did, it wasn’t who ye were.”

“There’s nothing special about me, Bran.” Like an icy breeze sweeping in from the north, her voice grew cold and hard. “I would prefer if you not pretend as if there was. I know exactly what I am, and your empty flattery is not going to change that.” Lips pursed, she turned away from him to stare blankly at a small pond, her shoulders as stiff and rigid as he’d ever seen them.

Who the devil hurt ye so badly? The sharp demand was on the tip of his tongue but he swallowed it back, knowing it was neither the time nor the place. When Lilly trusted him she would reveal the ghosts that haunted her. Then and only then he could send every last bloody one

of them straight to hell.

LILLY HADN'T MEANT to snap at Bran. Truly she hadn't. But when he'd begun to compliment her she'd been brought right back to Blooming Glen when Doyle had so effortlessly managed to snare her in his intricate web of endless praise and she, silly, wide-eyed lamb that she'd been, had let him lead her straight to slaughter.

He'd called her beautiful as well. *'The most beautiful woman I have ever laid my eyes upon. This little village doesn't deserve you, Lilly. You're destined for great things. Come with me to London. Let me show you what dreams await.'*

Their miserably tiny flat was hardly the thing of dreams, but by the time she realized how expertly she'd been duped it was too late. Doyle had gambled away all of her money and left her to fend for herself in a city she knew nothing about with people who would gladly sell their mother for a few pence.

But she'd managed. Against all odds, she'd found a job. Maybe it wasn't the *best* job, but it kept a roof over her head and food in her belly. Most importantly, she'd learned how to fend for herself. And she wasn't about to waste all of that hard won knowledge on another rake, no matter how charming or handsome he was.

"Could you take me to the corner of Fleet and West Broad, please?" she asked without turning her head. Every time she looked at Bran she found herself falling deeper into his penetrating gaze and it was becoming harder and harder to pull herself back out. "Juliet said there was a man there who might be able to offer me work."

“Aye, Jules mentioned she was going to speak to Yeti for ye.” The lane straightened out as they approached a small hill and Bran clucked his tongue, urging the team into a trot. “Good man, Yeti. One o’ the best. He taught Jules and I everything we know.”

Startled, Lilly forgot she was supposed to be looking *away* from Bran and instead turned in her seat to stare straight at him, violet eyes wide and wary. “You mean he’s a thief, too?”

Bran’s frown made her realize she’d spoken quite loudly, having raised her voice to be heard above the bouncing carriage and jingling harnesses. “Have a care, love,” he chided gently. “We’re not in St. Giles anymore.”

“I’m sorry.” She bit the inside of her cheek. “I didn’t mean–”

“Not to worry.” Where Doyle would have yelled and blustered and raised his fist, Bran simply shrugged her apology away with a careless lift of his shoulder. “Truth of the matter is that Yeti *was* a thief. A damned good one, too, until his hands gave out. Thankfully he ‘ad me and Jules to pick up where he left off.” His white teeth flashed in a grin and despite the cool breeze Lilly felt instantly hot and somewhat dizzy, as if she’d been standing too long in the sun.

“I – I don’t know if I will be able to...you know...” Her voice trailed away to a whisper. “*Steal things.*”

Bran’s loud guffaw of laughter had the horse’s flattening their ears. “The only thing yer in danger of stealing is a poor bloke’s heart, love.” He winked at her and patted his chest. “Lord knows ye have already snatched mine.”

Lilly smiled weakly. The twinkle in Bran’s eyes revealed he was

only joking, but the quiet yearning deep in the depths of her soul was painstakingly genuine.

It was the same yearning she'd felt late at night when she'd laid in her tiny cot and stared up at the ceiling willing for sleep to take her. A yearning to love and be loved in return. To have with Bran – or any man, for that matter – what she'd never had with Doyle. A true connection forged not from fear or the desperate desire to please, but from mutual respect and admiration.

With a small, imperceptible shake of her head she banished the thought. One day she'd find a husband. A fine, upstanding fellow from Blooming Glen. A farmer or a blacksmith. Mayhap even a doctor, if her reputation did not proceed her. Perhaps he wouldn't be the handsomest, or the most dashing, but he would be safe and loyal and kind.

Like a King Charles Spaniel, she thought with a wry twist of her lips. And what would be so wrong with that? She'd sought adventure and excitement with Doyle, and look where *that* had landed her. She wasn't about to go looking for the same thing again. Bran may have been the more enticing choice, but on paper he was every wrong decision she'd ever made in her life all wrapped into one large, lean, blue-eyed package.

“Yeti runs a reputable antique business. Well,” Bran amended at Lilly's dubious expression, “as reputable as a business can be in the East End. He's been in need of an assistant for a while. Someone to clean, run errands, organize inventory and the like. Does that sound appealing, lass?”

After a job that entailed having her tits pinched and her arse grabbed more times than she could possibly begin to count, it sounded absolutely heavenly.

“When can I start?” she asked, and Bran chuckled again.

“Why don’t ye take a few days to enjoy yourself? Rest up and relax. See all that London has to offer.”

“Oh, I really don’t think–”

“Have ye ever been to the Botanical Gardens?”

“No, but–”

“What about Astley’s Riding House? Ye haven’t lived until ye’ve seen a horse dance on its hind legs. Most amazing thing I’ve ever seen.”

“That sounds splendid” – it truly did – “however I really should start work as soon as–”

“Drury Lane, Hatchards, and Bond Street,” Bran continued, ticking off all the places Lilly had always wanted to see. “Let’s not forget the Royal Menagerie at the Tower. Word has it one of their lionesses just had a litter of cubs.”

Lilly’s breath caught. “Baby lions?”

“Aye, four of the little rompers according to the papers. It’s a three week long wait to see them, but I know someone who can get us in tomorrow if ye would like.”

Of course he did. Once again Lilly found herself faced with a decision that should have had an obvious answer. And once again she found herself wavering. After all, when would she have another chance to see a real honest-to-goodness lion and her cubs?

“Tomorrow, you said?” she asked, chewing on her bottom lip.

“Aye.” Bran’s gaze flicked to her mouth, eyes darkening as they lingered just long enough to bring a flush of heat to her cheeks. “First thing in the morning. And I promise not to pay ye a single compliment in the meantime.”

“Could you – could you also not look at me like that?” she asked, squirming on the soft leather seat.

“Like what?” he said huskily. Pulling back on the reins he brought the curricule to a neat halt beneath the shade of a large oak. Dappled shadows played across his hard jaw as he transferred the traces to his left hand and stretched out his right along the back of the seat, fingers absently toying with one of her long golden curls that had come loose from its pins.

“Like – like that!” Lilly’s voice was shrill, her breathing erratic. She cast a frantic glance around, but the only means of escape from the curricule was to climb over Bran’s lap. As she imagined her thighs resting intimately on top of his and her breasts pressed flush against his chest the color in her cheeks deepened to a dull, mottled red. Not because she didn’t like the idea...but because she *did*.

“Ah.” As if he could somehow glimpse the traitorous thoughts burning inside her mind, Bran’s mouth curved in a slow, sensuous smile. His fingers crept higher, and she bit back a moan when he began to gently massage the coiled muscles at the nape of her neck. “Ye mean like I want to grab a handful of that silky mane of yours, tilt your head back, and ravish yer mouth until ye forget yer own name?”

Oh my.

“Yes,” she said faintly. “Pre-precisely.”

“Sorry, love. I can’t do that.” His voice may have been soft, but his eyes spoke volumes. And all of it was wicked.

Goose pimples broke out on her flesh when he trailed a single fingertip down the delicate bumps of her vertebrae. When he grabbed a handful of her hair and gave a firm tug, drawing her chin up and placing her mouth level with his, she fought the urge to cry out. Not in pain...but in pleasure.

Her lashes fluttered closed. Her hands curled uselessly in her lap. And even before he captured her mouth with his, she knew she was damned.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HAD HE EVER tasted anything so sweet?

No, Bran answered silently as his tongue swept boldly between Lilly's teeth to sample the honeyed nectar of her mouth. *The answer was an absolute, irrevocable no.*

He'd kissed actresses. Opera singers. Ladies of the *ton*. Women who could send a man to his knees with a single scorching glance...and keep him there with only their tongue. But not a single one, nor any of the lascivious acts they'd performed on him over the years, could hold a bloody candle to Lilly's sweet mouth.

The kiss consumed him, drawing him in harder and faster than he'd ever deemed imaginable. Bran wasn't a difficult man to arouse. Give him a warm, willing woman – preferably a naked one – and his cock sprung to attention like a soldier saluting the general. But it typically took more than a kiss before he was ready to spend his seed, and yet the aching throb in his bollocks warned him he was in danger of doing precisely that...fully clothed in the middle of a damn park, no less.

His hands were filled with her luxurious waterfall of silky blonde hair, his mouth filled with the taste of her. He angled his body so their legs touched, his knee delving between the folds of her dress to press ever-so-lightly between her thighs. She rocked herself against him,

and he groaned with throaty approval when he felt her damp desire through the delicate layers of her undergarments. This was no shy, wilting flower in his arms but a tempestuous firebrand intent on making him burn.

What choice did he have but to return the favor?

"I feel ye, love," he rasped huskily against her ear. "Wet and wanting."

She murmured something incoherent in reply, her head lolling to the side as he licked his way down her neck to the long, elegant line of her collarbone. Dimly he felt the sharp prick of her nails against her chest as her fingers sank through his waistcoat and shirt to pierce the flesh beneath, drawing a deep growl from the depths of his throat.

Returning to her mouth he suckled her bottom lip, drawing it between his teeth in a sharp, passionate bite. Her small, breathless mewl of desire sent the flames of his arousal skyrocketing and his cock bulged painfully against the constraining wall of his trousers, desperately seeking what it couldn't have. At least not here, out in the open, with nary a roof or windows to shield them from prying eyes.

He knew he needed to stop. That *they* needed to stop. Then Lilly rubbed herself on his knee and they could have had an audience lined up twenty deep for all he bloody well cared; in that moment the only thing that mattered was bringing his woman the pleasure she craved.

His woman.

The words reverberated inside of his head as his hand snaked up between her skirts. Beneath her dress she wore a simple a shift and petticoat, neither of which impeded his path as he sought the center of

her womanhood.

She gasped when he slid a single fingertip through her soft downy curls. Moaned when he began to circle her swollen little bud. Her arms wound around his neck and her chin burrowed in the cleft of his shoulder, helplessly clinging to him as he circled and patted. She was deliciously, gloriously wet, and so close to the edge that he knew it would only take one deliberate stroke of his finger to send her spiraling into oblivion.

Perversely, he took his time, enjoying the way her entire body was quivering and the tiny, desperate sounds she was panting against his salt-slicked skin.

“I could do this all day, love.” He pressed his mouth to her ear and she shuddered when he traced the delicate shell with the tip of his tongue. “Do ye want me to stop?”

“Yes,” she cried. “No. I don’t...Bran...*please*.”

The single plea was his undoing. With a low, possessive growl he gave her what she wanted – what they *both* wanted – and watched in heavy-lidded pleasure as she came.

When the last shuddering after-shocks had left her she suddenly sat up bolt upright and pushed back against his chest, violet eyes frightened and frantic as she tugged hastily at her skirts and smoothed a hand through her hopelessly tangled curls.

“I...you...we shouldn’t have done that.” She bit down on her swollen bottom lip, causing Bran to grit his teeth and adjust himself through his trousers.

Hell and damnation. Being this aroused couldn’t have been good for

a man's health, but it had been worth the pain and discomfort just to see the sweet flutter of elation on Lilly's face as he drove her to orgasm.

"It's all right, love." He spoke to her in the same low, soothing tone he'd used in the Mermaid when they'd first met. "No one saw us."

"But they *could* have," she said, shoulders hunching in miserable embarrassment. "The park is filled with people! Any one of whom could have glanced over and seen...seen...*oh*." Cheeks burning bright as an apple, she leaned forward and buried her face in her hands.

"And how do ye think all of these people came to be? I'll tell ye one thing. Contrary to what your mum might have told ye, it wasn't the stork who brought them."

"But they didn't do anything *in the middle of Hyde Park while in broad daylight!*" she hissed, tilting her head to glare at him between her fingers. Bran bit back a grin.

Five seconds ago she'd been writhing shamelessly against his fingers and now the poor lass was contrite as a church mouse that had missed Sunday service. She was a fascinating mix of contradictions. Shy one moment, emboldened the next. Reluctant to accept his help, but all too willing to accept his hand. As beautiful a woman as he'd ever seen, but loathe to acknowledge her own beauty. Was it any wonder he was rapidly falling in—

Oh no ye don't, he cautioned as he yanked himself back from the brink just in time. *That's not a word to use lightly, and ye promised yerself long ago it would a chilly day in hell that ye ever used it at all.*

Love had no place in St. Giles, nor in the life of a thief. It was a

luxury best reserved for those who could afford it and his pockets had always come up empty where that particular emotion was concerned.

Not that he wasn't fond of his mistresses. He was. Quite fond, truth be told. But fondness was fleeting, a lesson he'd learned at his mother's knee. Lady Elizabeth had been abundantly fond of her husband...until she suddenly decided she wasn't.

Bran did not blame his mother for her change of heart. Not when he knew firsthand the seductive allure of wealth and comfort. If she'd truly been in love with his father she would have stayed, for love was the one thing that money couldn't buy. Unfortunately, she'd only been fond of the handsome Irish blacksmith, which had made it all too easy to leave... ruining the lives of both her son and husband in the process.

What might have been if Lady Elizabeth had chosen love? What might have become of *him*, had he been allowed to stay in Ireland, the product of two poor, but loving parents? A useless question, as there was no changing the past. But one he couldn't help but wonder about from time to time.

"Could we go back now?" Lilly sat up. Her hair was still in a tangle, her lips swollen from his kisses, her color high. She looked so adorably disheveled that he was tempted to kiss her all over again, but he suspected he'd already pushed his luck to its limit in that regard.

Like a tranquil lake, Lilly's passions ran dark and deep. Demand too much, too fast, and she would slip back beneath the surface with nary a ripple. He needed to take his time with her. To earn her trust before he tasted all the delectable parts of her body he'd dreamt about last

night.

“Aye, that we can.” Picking up the reins, Bran gave a cluck and the team sprang into a high-stepping trot. Lost to their own thoughts, he and Lilly rode the rest of the way home in silence. When they disembarked from the carriage she formally thanked him for ‘a very fine outing’ before scurrying quickly inside.

As she fled up the stairs, he couldn’t help but wonder if she was running from him...or herself.

CHAPTER EIGHT

NOT FOR THE first time, Lilly questioned what the devil she was doing.

Playing with fire, she answered silently as she touched her swollen lips and walked to the window to gaze out at the smoky jumble of peaked roofs and narrow chimneys. A slight breeze stirred the air, blowing the smoke out towards the Thames. From her vantage point she could just make out the billowing white sails of a ship coming into port, its tall mast appearing to cut through the middle of buildings as it carried mercantile goods to the docks where they'd be unloaded, sorted, and sold.

Not so long ago - less than a day, really, although it felt like much more - she would have watched the approaching sails and felt a tired sort of dread, for she knew the ships carried more than spices and cotton.

Once the anchors were lowered and the hulls emptied, the men who had just spent two months crossing the Atlantic would go in search of booze, women, and entertainment, often combining the first two in order to produce the third. They'd flock to the Mermaid like gulls to the fishing wares, stinking of salt and covered in grime, their beard-covered faces splitting into leers of hungry anticipation when she

carried ale to the tables by the bucketful.

Lilly shuddered as she recalled how their fingers had grabbed and pinched, leaving behind bruises that had been black and blue for days. Their pawing hands had brought her nothing but disgust. Unlike Bran, whose clever fingers and wicked tongue had driven her to the wildest heights of desire.

She pressed her hands to her cheeks as warmth spread across her face and down her neck to pool in her breasts where her nipples still throbbed, the tips aching to be touched...by Bran. Turning away from the window, she wrapped her arms tightly across her chest and walked to the bed, but one glance at the neatly made coverlet had her imagining all sorts of naughty things.

Blast it all! Driving the heel of her shoe into the carpet, she marched to the writing desk. There was nothing remotely arousing about pencil and paper, but even as she sat down to practice her letters her mind - the one thing she could not escape - betrayed her.

In the blink of an eye she was back in the carriage and Bran's mouth was on her mouth and his hands were on...oh. Gasping, she threw down the pencil and buried her head in the crook of her elbow. She couldn't believe he'd touched her all the way...well, all the way down *there*! Out in the open where anyone could see, no less. She should have been positively mortified, and part of her was. But another part - a considerably larger part - had never felt more aroused.

Bran's kiss had been like nothing she'd ever experienced and everything she'd ever dreamed about. Not to mention what had come

after. She still didn't know what had happened to her body, only that Bran had been the cause of it and she desperately wanted it to happen again.

But it can't, she thought firmly as she lifted her head. *Absolutely not.*

She needed to end whatever it was they had between them before it grew into something she couldn't control. And she needed to do it now. There would be no more outings. No zoo. And *definitely* no more kissing.

But when she went downstairs - after waiting for the color to recede from her cheeks and repinning her hair - Bran was nowhere to be found. Instead a plump brunette with twinkling brown eyes and a dimpled smile was waiting for her in the middle foyer.

"There ye are, lovie!" she exclaimed. "I thought ye might've slipped out the back. La, look at ye." Whistling under her breath, she made a wide circle around Lilly, eyes narrowing to thin, thoughtful slits of hazel as her gaze roamed from Lilly's confused face to her shoes and back again. "'E didn't exaggerate this time. Pretty as a yellow daisy, ye are. Even if that dress is a *dreadful* fit. One of Jules', I imagine. It's a good thing that one likes to pretend she's a boy as she'd make a terrible woman." Clucking under her tongue, the brunette whipped out a sewing tape from her ample bosom and began to take Lilly's measurements.

"What are you...who are you...*oh!*" Lilly gasped when the woman pulled the tape across her breasts. "I beg your pardon!"

"Yes, lovie?" The brunette arched an expectant brow. "Is somethin' the matter?"

“Who - who *are* you and what are you doing here?”

“E didn’t tell ye I was comin’, did ‘e? Men,” the brunette said with another cluck of her tongue before Lilly could respond. Rolling her eyes, she draped the tape around her neck and pinned her hands to her hips. “Always doing things half-arsed. Although Bran means well, bless ‘is scoundrel heart. Ye should ‘ave seen the way his eyes lit up when he talked about ye. La! I’ve never seen the lad in such a state.” She grinned ear to ear. “I’m Bea, lovie. And I’m ‘ere to dress ye like a bloomin’ duchess.”

This was Old Bea? Lilly had been expecting someone...well, older. But despite her confident manner and the wealth of knowledge glimmering in her friendly brown gaze, Bea couldn’t have been more than twenty.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Bea. But I’m afraid there has been a misunderstanding.” She smiled apologetically. “You see, I’m going to be leaving soon and-”

“Leavin’?” Bea blinked. “Now why would ye go and do a foolish thing like that?”

Why indeed, a little voice said slyly.

Oh do shut up, Lilly thought crossly. To Bea she said, “Because - well, to be quite honest, because Bran is a rake.” Without going into great detail, it was the simplest explanation she could possibly give.

“So is every man and dog alive, lovie. Now lift yer arms so I can get yer waist. Cor, you’re a tiny little thing, aren’t ye? Keep tryin’ to leave weight myself, I do, but I’ve an awful keening for buttered scones. The way they melt on your tongue...la,” she sighed. “It’s sinful, it is.”

“You don’t understand,” Lilly said even as she obediently raised her arms above her head. “The only reason I’m in London is because of a rake. I didn’t know he was a rake at the *time*, of course, but-”

“But ‘e wooed ye and worshipped ye and then left ye high and dry, did ‘e?”

“Why yes.” Lilly blinked. “Yes he did. How did you know that?”

“The people might change, but the story is always the same, lovie. I’m sorry ye got caught up with a blackguard. ‘E must have been a right bastard to walk on such a fine lady as ye. But that’s life, ain’t it?” Bea shrugged. “Ye can put your arms down now.”

Lilly lowered her arms. “If you know what I am talking about, then surely you must understand why I cannot stay here.”

“Can’t say as I do, lovie. Hold this on yer shoulder.” Handing her one end of the sewing tape, Bea knelt down and stretched the other end all the way to the floor. Muttering something under her breath, she popped back up and shook out her skirts. “There. That should do it. I’ll get the girl’s workin’ today, and ye’ll be struttin’ around town like a bleedin’ princess afore the end o’ the week. Do ye have any hats?”

“Hats? No, I-”

“Gloves?”

“I’m afraid-”

“La,” Bea said with a sorrowful shake of her head. “Ye *are* in a sorry state, aren’t ye? The second Bran returns I want ye to insist he take ye to Madame Fountaine’s. Expensive as a French-speakin’ whore, she is, but ye won’t find any finer accessories in all of London.”

Lilly was beginning to feel dizzy. “That won’t be necessary. And neither will any dresses. I’m sorry to have wasted your time, Bea, but as I said-”

“Yer leaving,” the seamstress interrupted. “Aye, I heard ye the first time.”

“Then you must understand-”

“The only thing I *understand* is ye must be out o’ yer gourd to want to leave a fine bloke like Bran. Has ‘e struck ye?”

“No, of course not,” Lilly said, appalled that Bea would even suggest such a thing.

“Taken ye against yer will?”

“No.” She thought of their kiss. “I, ah, have been quite willing.”

“Threatened ye, then.”

“No. Nothing like-”

“Tried to sell ye to a brothel?”

“No! He’s been nothing but kind to me.”

“And yet ye can’t wait to fly out o’ here like a bird from its nest.”

“Only because I don’t want to make the same mistake again. I can’t fall in love with a rake. I can’t,” Lilly insisted when Bea merely smiled.

“Ah, lovie. Bless yer heart.” The seamstress’s expression was both amused and vaguely pitying. “Can’t ye see ye already have?”

“YE LOOK LIKE you’re a thousand miles away, lass.”

Lilly paused with her spoon halfway to her lips, a sheepish smile crossing her face. “I’m sorry. I was just thinking.”

“About me? Aye,” Bran said smugly when a light flush stole across

her cheeks. “That’s what I thought.”

They were having supper in the dining room; a generous three-course meal comprised of lamb stew, roasted chicken breast topped with a creamy artichoke sauce, sautéed onions, and bread fresh from the oven. It was the finest food Lilly had eaten in years and she’d hardly tasted a bite, her mind consumed with her conversation with Bea from earlier in the day.

The seamstress was wrong. She had to be. Lilly wasn’t in love with Bran. She *wasn’t*! But if that was completely true, why couldn’t she stop thinking about their kiss? Or the warm glow she felt whenever he looked at her? Or the way her pulse raced whenever he touched her? She kept telling herself that it was just lust. That it would pass. That she’d come to her senses soon enough. But what if she didn’t? What if she really *had* fallen in love with another rake?

Impossible, her head scoffed. *You hardly know the man.*

Romantic, her heart sighed. *Like something out of a fairy tale.*

Except Lilly knew how fairy tales *really* ended, and it wasn’t happily-ever-after.

“Bea came by today while you were out.” Bran had been gone for the better part of the afternoon, returning just before dinner. He hadn’t offered to tell her where he’d been, and she hadn’t asked. “I assumed we’d be going to her shop.”

Bran shrugged. “I thought this would be easier for ye.”

“I really don’t need any new dresses, and I will be—”

“Paying me back in full. Aye, lass.” He sipped his wine. “I heard ye the first three times.”

“You may have heard me, but it seems you didn’t listen.” Her fingers drummed anxiously across the table. “What are your intentions, Bran?”

One tawny brow slowly lifted as he set his glass down. “My intentions?”

“Yes. Your intentions. With me.” She’d never asked the question of Doyle, having assumed she already knew the answer. Given how terribly wrong she’d been, it wasn’t a mistake she intended on repeating. “You rescued me from a - a very undesirable situation, for which I’m incredibly grateful. And you’ve been more than generous in allowing to stay in your home and feeding me and clothing me. But I’m not a stray dog.”

Bran frowned. “I never said ye were.”

“Which means,” she continued, “you must expect something in return. Do you want to sleep with me?”

“Do I...” His voice trailed away, and for the first time Lilly had the distinct pleasure of seeing *his* cheeks fill with color. “What the devil kind of question is that?” he scowled.

“An honest one.” Clasping her fingers together before they drilled a hole through the table, she dropped them into her lap. “I - I’ve been down this road before, as shameful as it is to admit it. I know what is going to happen.”

“Aye?” he challenged, crossing his arms over his chest. Candlelight flickered across the taut line of his jaw, illuminating a day’s worth of dark blond bristle. His hair was tousled, as if he’d run his hands through it one too many times, and he’d discarded his jacket and

waistcoat in favor of a plain linen shirt that was unbuttoned past his throat. “And what is that?”

Lilly reached for her wine. “Our affair will be pleasant...for a time. And for a time, you’ll say and do all of the right things. But then you’ll become resentful of me, and cruel, and...and other things.” She stared blindly down into her glass. “You’ll hurt me, either by accident or design” Her gaze lifted to find him watching her, his blue eyes unreadable. “And I don’t want to be hurt again,” she whispered.

“Do I strike ye as a bitter, resentful person?” He uncrossed his arms.

“Well no,” Lilly admitted. “But-”

“A person can’t become what they’re not, love. A person is who they are.”

“But that’s precisely my point,” she said earnestly. “You are who you are, and I can’t expect you to change.”

“And who am I?”

“A rake.” She brought the wine to her lips. Took a small, measured sip. It was difficult to speak with such blunt honesty, but she knew it was for the best. Better they lay their cards on the table now rather than in two months when he’d already grown weary of her. “You’re a rake, Bran.”

“That I am,” he said simply. “I don’t bother to deny it. I’m a rake, and a rogue, and a scoundrel. But one thing I’m not is a bastard, Lilly.” Reaching his arm across the table, he gently loosened her viselike grip on the long, elegant stem of the wineglass and squeezed her fingers. “I’m sorry ye’ve been hurt. Ye dinna deserve it, and ye did

nothing wrong.”

The words, for all they were quietly spoken, rang in Lilly’s ears like church bells. She bit her lips as tears pricked the corners of her eyes, biting down so fiercely she tasted blood.

“I...I was young and foolish. I saw what I wanted to see instead of what was really there, and I paid dearly for my naiveté. But I’m not the same girl I once was, Bran.” Tears clung to her lashes as she lifted her chin. “And I won’t make the same mistake again. I - I like you.” *Far more than I should.* “There’s no use in pretending otherwise. So if I am going to be your mistress, I need things between us to be clear from the beginning.”

“Is that what ye want then?” he said huskily, his thumb sweeping across the inside of her wrist where her pulse scrambled to keep up with the erratic beat of her heart. “To be my mistress?”

“I...” For an instant, she allowed herself to imagine the impossible. A quaint village church. A flowing white dress. Flowers in her hair and a lace veil over her face. Bran, cutting a dashing figure in a black tailcoat and cravat. Her family in the front pew, their faces wreathed in smiles. The soft, sweeping chords of a harp as she walked down the aisle. Her mouth firmed. “Yes, that’s what I want. But with a few conditions.”

The raw heat that had leapt into Bran’s eyes when she’d mentioned the word ‘mistress’ flickered and dimmed. “Aye?” he said warily, releasing her hand to slide back into his seat. “And what would those be?”

“First, we both acknowledge that these things do not last forever.

When one of us wishes to end the arrangement, we will be forthright and truthful with one another. There will be no hard feelings or bitterness on either side.”

He gave a short, clipped nod. “What else?”

“Whatever is given during the course of the affair cannot be taken back. When my...my previous lover left he took everything with him, leaving me completely destitute and without any means to return home. I won’t have that happen again.”

“Ye will be well compensated for your time.” Although his countenance remained devoid of expression, there was a hard edge to Bran’s voice she’d never heard before. Almost as if he were angry with her. She couldn’t imagine why. Wasn’t she giving him everything a man desired? Clear rules and boundaries and a way out for both of them when the time came to end it. What more could he possibly want?

“Is that it, then?” he asked.

“No. There’s one more thing. The most important thing.” Ignoring the painful tug in her heart, she met his sharp gaze without blinking. “No matter what happens, we will not fall in love.”

CHAPTER NINE

LILLY MADE HAVING an affair sound as desirable as getting a tooth pulled. Bran didn't fancy himself a romantic man - poetry and flowery declarations of love were best saved for fops and fools - but he wasn't after signing up for a bloody *business* arrangement.

Where was the passion? The lust? The spontaneity? Leaping into bed without knowing how long an affair was going to last was half the damn fun. But if he wanted Lilly's warm, nubile little body writhing underneath of him (not to mention on top of him, in front of him, and beside him) he had no choice except to go along with her rules. At least for now. Although if she honestly believed she was going to be able to up and leave him whenever she pleased...his jaw clenched at the thought.

She was *his*, goddamnit. She had been his since the first moment he saw her. And he'd be damned to hell and back if he gave her up without a fight.

"If that's how ye want it, lass, then that's how it'll be." He stood up, the legs of his chair scraping loudly against the wooden floorboards. Her violet eyes widened when he approached and his abdomen clenched in reaction to the faint quiver of awareness he felt when he rested his hand on the back of her neck, fingers gently caressing the

taut muscles.

“Wh-what are you doing?” She licked her lips, a nervous gesture that had him biting back a groan. The things he wanted to do with that mouth...

“Sealing our agreement with a kiss, of course.” He nudged her chair to the side and slipped his arms around her waist, lifting her effortlessly to her feet where she stood frozen like a deer in the crosshairs of a hunter’s bow. “Unless you’d rather a handshake.”

Her gaze darted down to his mouth. Lingered for several seconds before slowly lifting to his eyes. “You - you want to start our affair *now*?”

Could she be any more adorable? Grinning, he ran his hands through her hair, gently prying the pins loose until the entire length of her heavy blonde mane tumbled down her back in a waterfall of curls. “Is there something you’re waiting for, love?”

“No, I just...no.” Her hair spilled over her shoulders as she shook her head from side to side. “I’ve been thinking about what happened. In the carriage,” she clarified in a whisper, teeth nibbling at her bottom lip.

“And?” He traced the side of his face with a single fingertip, following the curve of her cheekbone and jaw until it led him down to her collarbone. He paused in the hollow of her throat to watch as her nipples stiffened. Spread his thighs slightly apart when his cock throbbed in response.

Bloody hell. He hadn’t even kissed her yet and he was hard as a pike. If they made it upstairs to the bedroom - a very questionable ‘if’

at this point - he was going to come like a twelve-year-old lad touching a pair of tits for the first time.

“And...I liked it it.” She peered shyly up at him from beneath her lashes. “I liked it quite a bit.”

This time Bran didn’t bother to hold back his groan. “Ah, Lilly. If you liked that then you’re going to *love* this.”

In the park his kiss had been gentle. Soft. Slow. He’d given everything and demanded nothing. But now, with lust pumping through his veins and desire heating his blood, he took what he wanted without apology or remorse.

Her head arched back, her stiff nipples pressing against his chest as he devoured her mouth with hungry sweeps of his tongue. Spinning her around, he sat down in the chair and pulled her onto his lap, adjusting her legs so she straddled him, her skirts bunched up past her knees.

Unfamiliar with the position she stiffened and started to draw away, but a coaxing whisper and a teasing nibble on the sensitive shell of her ear had her leaning into him, shapely calves clinging instinctively to the back legs of the chair as her arms wound around his neck and her fingers sank into his hair.

He kissed her again and she kissed him back, her enthusiasm overshadowing any lack of experience. They explored each other’s mouths with licks and nibbles, taking the time to learn the taste, the texture, the feel of one another. Lilly grew bolder with every heated breath until she tentatively bit down on his lip. He growled in approval and she tensed, her eyes flying open in dismay.vg

“I - I’m sorry,” she gasped. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

If by ‘hurt him’ she meant she’d nearly made him come in his trousers than aye, she’d hurt him.

“Do it again,” he demanded, rocking his hips up off the chair so she could feel the long, hot length of his arousal. “Harder.”

When she obeyed the final strands of control he’d been using to control his ardor snapped and he swept Lilly up his arms with the single-minded purpose of getting her into his bed as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, he’d underestimated the power she yielded over him.

One shy smile and he had her pressed against the bannister, his head delving between her perfectly shaped breasts. The scrape of her nails across his chest and he pinned her up against the wall, his hands burrowing beneath her dress to cup her rounded bottom. A trail of clothes followed them up the stairs.

His shirt. Her stockings. His trousers. Her drawers.

By the time they reached his bedroom they were both naked and panting, their skin flushed with arousal and their eyes dark with desire. They fell backwards onto the mattress, Bran beneath and Lilly above. With her hair tousled around her shoulders and her lips swollen from his kisses she looked like an ethereal creature spun from fantasy, and as Bran suckled one of her rosy tipped nipples he couldn’t help but marvel at the stroke of fate that had brought this velvet-eyed fairy into his life.

Then she was under him, golden curls splayed across the pillows and nails digging delicious furrows into his shoulders as he dipped a

single finger into her honeyed core. A line of perspiration gleamed on his temple when her muscles contracted and she clenched around him.

“You’re so wet,” he groaned.

She murmured something incoherent in response, her head writhing restlessly from side to side as he took his time pleasuring her, stretching her tight little entrance with one finger, then two.

“Bran...”

“Aye, love?” he said huskily.

“I can’t...I don’t...*Please*,” she whimpered, and the single word was his undoing.

She gasped when he slowly slid inside of her inch by glorious inch. Clung to him when he began to rock in and out, taking the time to find a rhythm that pleased them both. Cried out his name when they hovered on the precipice of oblivion...and sank with him down, down, down into the shadowy depths of mindless desire.

LILLY COULDN’T MOVE her arms. Or her legs. Or anything, for that matter. Not with Bran’s body pressing down on top of her.

It was a comfortable weight, like a heavy blanket on a cold winter’s night. With a contented, catlike sigh she stretched her arms above her head and closed her eyes, only to open them again when she felt the feathery brush of Bran’s lips on her breast.

She lazily arched her spine as he licked one nipple and then the other before finally rolling onto his side and propping himself up on an elbow, tawny locks tumbling rakishly across his brow as he gazed down at her.

“You’re a vision, lass,” he murmured, trailing the back of his hand down across her ribcage and the slender protrusion of her hip bone. “Even more beautiful than I imagined.”

Suddenly shy, she crossed her arms over her chest. “You imagined me naked?”

“Aye, of course.” His eyebrows drew together. “Didn’t ye do the same with me?”

Her blush gave her away even before she confessed, “Maybe - maybe a little.”

He kissed the tip of her nose, and even though he didn’t know it - how could he? - that simple show of affection meant more to her than a priceless jewel. Doyle had never bothered to lay next to her after their lovemaking was complete, let alone slide his arm beneath her shoulders and draw her against the sturdy expanse of his chest.

“I didn’t know it could be like that.” Her voice was barely above a whisper, her eyes pinned to a cluster of dusky blond curls between his pectorals.

“Like what, love?” he murmured, resting his chin on the top of her head.

“Wonderful,” she said, blinking back tears. “I didn’t know it could be so wonderful.”

CHAPTER TEN

THE NEXT MORNING Bran brought Lilly to see the lions.

Comprised of jungle cats, monkeys, bears, and even an elephant, the Royal Menagerie was housed at the Tower of London, a veritable stone fortress on the north bank of the Thames. The animals were gifts to the royal family from all over the world, many having traveled thousands of miles by land and sea.

Fascinated by the idea of seeing creatures that had prowled through the jungles of Asia and lazed about on the plains of Africa, Lilly had always wanted to visit the tower. But as she Bran strolled along the wide stone walkways and peered into the small cages, many of which were hardly any bigger than the animals they contained, she felt only pity.

“They look so very sad, don’t they?” She started to reach her hand between the bars towards a little gray monkey with soulful black eyes, but Bran grabbed her wrist and pulled it back.

“Careful, love. The buggers might look sad and hopeless, but they’ll take yer finger quick as they’ll take a treat.” He smiled grimly. “Jest ask Lady Mary. Word ‘as it a lion took her entire arm.”

“Her *arm*?” Lilly breathed. She took a step back from the monkey. “The poor things look half starved. It was probably just hungry.”

“Aye, try tellin’ that to Lady Mary.”

They continued their tour, eventually ending where they’d begun: in front of the lion pen. The newly born cubs, oblivious to their captivity, rolled and wrestled across the straw covered floor while their mother kept a watchful eye from atop a stone pedestal.

“What will happen when they’re grown?” Lilly asked, stepping out of the way as three young children, tended by a visibly overwhelmed governess, shoved to the front of the exhibit and began to clap and shout.

“The cubs?”

“Yes.” She stood on her toes in an attempt to see above the swelling crowd. While all of the animals garnered a fair bit of attention the lions were by far and large the most popular, particularly when the cubs were out playing.

His hands closing around her waist, Bran lifted her effortlessly off the ground. “I’m not sure, love. One or two will remain here, I imagine. The rest will find their way to private homes.”

She shivered when she felt the warm brush of his breath against her ear. Trembled when his grip tightened, drawing her firmly against the hard plane of his body. Thus far this morning he’d had the manners of an impeccable gentleman, acting more like a tour guide than the dashing scoundrel who had brought her to heights of passion she’d never even known existed. But there was nothing *gentlemanly* about the way he was holding her now...or the throbbing rod she felt pressing against the curve of her bottom.

“Bran,” she protested, her gaze darting around the crowded space.

“Put me down! People are watching.”

“Let them watch,” he growled before he nipped her earlobe.

Her knees wobbled. “This - this is hardly the appropriate place to - *ohhh*,” she moaned, her head falling to the side when his tongue replaced his teeth.

“Ye like that, don’t ye?” he whispered devilishly. “When I touch ye. Taste ye. Spread your legs a little further apart, love, and let me feel how wet ye are...”

“*Bran!*” Her face was so hot it was a wonder her entire body didn’t combust into flame. “You really must stop at - oh!” This time her gasp was for an entirely different reason when she happened to catch a glimpse of one of the governess’ unruly charges out of the corner of her eye. As she watched in horror the boy twisted his body sideways and tried to squeeze himself between the bars of the lion’s cage.

“Ye weren’t asking me to stop last night,” Bran growled as his hands slid up to cup her breasts.

“No, you don’t understand!” Wrenching herself free of his grasp, she whirled around and raised wide, frightened eyes to his. “The little boy! He’s in danger!”

No sooner had she spoken the words out loud than a collective gasp of horror rippled through the crowd, confirming Lilly’s worst fears even more she spun back and saw the boy stumble into the cage. He landed hard on his hands and knees, scraping his leg and one elbow. Unfazed by the blood trickling down his arm, he popped back up to his feet and started walking towards one of the cubs with his hand outstretched, talking to the tiny lion as if it were a puppy.

“Come on,” he said cheerfully. “I won’t hurt you.”

No, Lilly thought frantically as her gaze flew from the boy to the mother lioness who had gone rigid atop her stone perch, every muscle coiling into one hard knot of anticipation. *But she will hurt you.*

“Bran, what can we...Bran?” But he was no longer behind her. To Lilly’s disbelief she saw him pushing his way through the crowd and then he jumped up on the bars of the cage just as a woman in a feather plumed hat let out a terrified scream.

“The lions are going to *eat* him!” she cried before collapsing in a dead faint.

Clasping her hands together until her knuckles turned white, Lilly silently willed Bran to be careful. With the graceful agility of a monkey - or in this case, a thief - he scaled the cage and leapt into the pen, dropping down directly behind the boy and drawing the attention of the lioness. With a low, threatening growl she jumped off her perch and crouched low, yellow eyes fixated on Bran as her tail swished slowly back and forth.

A terrified scream bubbled up inside of Lilly’s throat when the lioness roared. The loud, ferocious sound echoed off the stone walls and caused two more people - one of them a finely dressed gentleman in a white cravat and top hat - to faint. Bran did not so much as flinch.

“Ello there, love,” he said cheerfully. “Quite a busy day ye’ve been having. Look at all these ladies and gents who’ve come to see ye. Right famous, ye are. And those are some fine looking cubs ye’ve got there.”

As Bran continued to speak, using the same reassuring tone he’d

used with Lilly, he knelt down and gestured for the boy to climb onto his back. Having finally seemed to realize the danger he was in the boy obeyed immediately, tears of fright rolling down his rounded cheeks as he wrapped his arms around Bran's neck and clung with all his might.

The crowd held its breath and Lilly's nails dug painful furrows into her palms as Bran started to back up towards the fence with excruciating slowness. He'd nearly reached it when disaster struck in the form of a hysterical mother. She must have been at another exhibit while her governess tended the children, and had returned to collect them when she saw her son, quite literally, in the lion's den.

"TEDDY!" she shrieked as she flung herself against the iron bars. "TEDDY, DARLING! WHAT ARE YOU DOING? GET OUT OF THERE AT ONCE!"

The lioness, having been somewhat calmed by Bran's soothing voice, immediately tensed. A low, ominous growl rumbled from the depths of her throat and her tail began to swish with renewed vigor. Bran stopped short as the lioness's feral gaze slid back and forth between him and the distraught mother, as if trying to decide who to devour first. The boy whimpered.

"Ma'am," Bran said tersely, "if ye could shut yer damn trap for one second-"

"TEDDY! MY POOR TEDDY. HE'S GOING TO BE EATEN! OH, I CANNOT STAND TO WATCH!"

The foolish mother was going to get both Bran and her son killed! Lilly's teeth sank into her bottom lip, biting down with so much force

she tasted blood. Unable to stand helplessly by any longer, she began to push and shove her way through the enthralled crowd. When she reached the mother she didn't think, she just acted. Grabbing the woman by the arm, she yanked her away from the pen with so much force they both went sprawling backwards in a tangle of skirts.

"What are you doing?" the mother cried shrilly. "Unhand me at once! My son needs me!"

"The only thing your son needs if for you to be quiet! *Oomph*," Lilly grunted when the mother drove an elbow into her ribs in her haste to stand. The hard blow would have been enough to dissuade most women, but Lilly hadn't worked at the Mermaid for more than three years without getting in a scrap or two. Rolling onto her hands and knees, she reached out and managed to grab ahold of the woman's hair.

Bystanders jumped out of the way as they rolled, spitting and scratching, across the floor. It was a most indecent display. One that would shame Lilly down to her core once she regained her senses. But in the heat of the moment the only thing she was thinking about was Bran.

Suddenly it didn't matter if he was a rake of the first order. The only thing of importance was his life, and that of the little boy's.

Thankfully, Lilly and the mother's tussle had distracted the lioness long enough for Bran to scale the fence. The crowd erupted into wild cheers as he dropped safely down on the other side. Rushing forward, the governess scooped her loudly sobbing charge into her arms and squeezed him tight while Lilly released her death grip on the boy's

mother and climbed slowly to her feet. Blowing a loose curl out of her eyes she scanned the mob in search of Bran, but trying to find him amidst the throng of bodies was like searching for a needle in a haystack.

Without warning two strong hands suddenly closed around her middle, pulling her back against a chest that was as hard as it was familiar.

“*Bran.*” A relieved sob welled inside of Lilly’s throat as she spun around. Claspng her palms to his rugged jawline she searched his handsome countenance for any cuts or bruises, but he appeared completely unharmed. In fact, he looked *pleased* with himself. Without warning Lilly’s concern turned to anger.

“You could have been killed!” Stepping out of his embrace she regarded him with tightly drawn brows and flashing eyes. “That lion could have *eaten* you!”

Bran’s grin was completely unrepentant. “It’ll take more than a lion to take down the likes of me, love. But it does my heart good to know ye were so worried about me.”

“I wasn’t worried about *you*.” She slapped his hand away when he reached for her. “I was - I was worried about the boy.”

“Aye,” he said solemnly. “The boy. Then it’s a good thing he’s safe as well.”

“You never should have risked your life.”

“And who else would have done it, if not me?” He gestured around the room. “All these fancy nabobs and not a one was willin’ to lift a finger. Useless as tits on a cat, the lot of them.”

He was right, of course. Still...

“Do not ever do that again,” Lilly ordered, shaking her finger as if she were admonishing a naughty child instead of a fully grown man. Anger gave her the courage to speak her mind, something she’d learned not to do with Doyle. It felt both refreshing and liberating, particularly when Bran did not shout or raise his fist. Instead, to her shock - and secret delight - he yanked her against him and kissed her until she saw stars.

“I swear never to climb into a lion’s cage again.” Blue eyes twinkling, he kissed the tip of her nose and brushed a curl behind her ear. “There. Does that make ye happy?”

Lilly sniffed. “It’s a start.”

Turning quickly to the side so he couldn’t see her smile, she tucked her arm neatly through his and they walked side by side out of the menagerie, never to return again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

OVER THE NEXT four weeks Lilly was happier than she'd ever been. Bran treated her like a queen, and she'd never been so spoiled in all of her life. It seemed she had only to *think* of something and he gave it to her.

A new hat trimmed with silk ribbon. A cloak lined with the softest fur she'd ever felt. A signed first edition by her favorite author whose name she'd spoken only in passing. Not to mention an entirely new wardrobe complete with enough shoes, gloves, and undergarments to last her entire lifetime.

Although it wasn't just the things he gave her. While perfectly lovely, they were all material. Easily given and easily taken away.

No.

It was how he *treated* her. The long, lingering looks that never failed to bring heat to her belly and a blush to her cheeks. The way he listened with such rapt attention, as if every word that graced her lips was of the utmost importance. The way he asked for her opinion and then actually heeded it. She'd never had anyone heed her suggestions before. Not her mother, not her father, and certainly not Doyle.

And it was how he touched her. Sometimes his caresses were so sweet she could have wept from the gentleness of them, and other

times he took her with all the savagery of a wild beast. All of her shyness and inhibitions melted away when she was wrapped in his arms, revealing a passionate creature she'd never known was hiding deep, deep inside of her, yearning to get out.

Under Bran's tender care she'd gradually transformed from a shy, wilting daisy into a beautiful rose. But this rose still had thorns; tiny sharp reminders of a past she couldn't quite seem to forget, no matter how she tried.

She felt as if she were constantly watching a clock. As long as the hands kept moving, everything would stay the same. But the minute they stopped then so would her newfound happiness. All because she'd gone and done the one thing she had promised herself she wouldn't do: she'd fallen in love with Bran. Deliriously, wildly, head-over-heels in love. And while part of her dreamed of their affair lasting forever, the other part was simply waiting for the left shoe to drop.

She knew Bran wouldn't throw her out with nothing. He wasn't that sort of man. He would see to it that she was taken of, but how many shillings did it take to repair a broken heart? With every day that passed the price climbed higher and higher...until she feared it was one she might never be able to afford.

Lilly glanced up from the book she'd been mindlessly paging through when she heard footsteps on the stone walkway leading out to the rear garden. Schooling her features to disguise the unease that rippled just beneath the surface, she greeted Bran with a smile. "I didn't expect you back so soon."

“The errand didn’t take nearly as long as I thought it would.” He sat down beside her on the wooden bench and pulled her into his arms for a kiss. The instant his mouth closed over hers the book slipped from her hands, the words completely forgotten as he nibbled a slow, scorching trail across her jaw and down her neck. But when his mouth began to trail lower she splayed her hand against his chest and pushed, a laugh bubbling in her throat.

“Bran, it’s the middle of the day,” she protested breathlessly.

“Aye.” He hooked his thumb on her capped sleeve and dragged it down, revealing the creamy top of one breast. “And a fine day it is,” he added, a rakish gleam in his eye as he openly admired her bosom.

“Juliet is right inside. She could come out at any – *Bran!*” she squealed when he lowered his head and licked her nipple through the soft muslin fabric of her gown. He growled with satisfaction as he suckled the pointed peak and for a moment Lilly let him do as he wished, her head lolling back and her lashes fluttering as moisture gathered between her thighs.

The slam of a door had her sitting up with a gasp. Scooting to the far end of the bench, she yanked up her bodice and glowered at her lover. “How many times must I remind you that these – these *activities* are best reserved for the bedroom?”

Bran kicked out his legs and clasped his hands behind his head, the very picture of an unrepentant rake. “At least once more. What can I say, love? I missed ye.”

“You’ve only been gone for a few hours,” she reminded him.

Rather like Bran himself, his schedule seemed to be completely

arbitrary. Sometimes he would spend the entire day with her. Other times he would leave right after breakfast and not return until dinner. Two nights ago she'd woken to find him gone with only a note left on his pillow to let her know he'd return at dawn.

Lilly never asked where he went and he never offered to tell her. She suspected his 'errands', as he called him, were of the nefarious sort. That is to say, not completely legal. She always worried for him when he was gone and breathed a sigh of relief when he returned, for she knew just how dangerous London could be. Particularly for a criminal. But when she'd voiced her concerns he'd brushed aside her worries with a grin and a shake of his head.

'Don't ye worry your pretty head over the likes of me, love,' he'd said, pressing an affectionate kiss to her brow. *'I know what I'm doing'.*

She had no doubt of that. For all that he spoke and acted like just another East Ender, she suspected Bran was a very rich man. Just the cost of her clothes alone should have beggared him, and yet when he'd received the note (the amount of which had made her knees wobble) he hadn't so much as batted an eye.

If they were to marry and have children she would ask that he give up his life of crime. But their relationship, while wonderful, was only temporary. There would be no wedding. There would be no children. There would be no future.

There couldn't be.

Not with a rake.

Not even with a rake she'd fallen helplessly in love with.

"I have one more errand to run tonight." He rested his hand on her

thigh, his thumb absently smoothing out a wrinkle in her skirt. "Then I'll be flush for a while. I thought we might get out of town for a bit. Spend some time in the country."

"I do miss it," Lilly said wistfully. "The rolling fields. The woods as far as the eye can see. The quiet. I've come to like London, but it does have a certain..."

"Smell?" Bran suggested.

Her lips quirked. "I was going to say distinctive flavor."

"Have ye ever been to the Mayfair Gardens?"

"No." Her brow furrowed in thought. "I don't know if I've even heard of them."

"Not many people 'ave. Everyone and their mother has been to the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, but if it's the country ye want then it's Mayfair ye need to visit. Let's go."

"Now?" she asked in surprise when he stood up and offered his hand.

He canted his head. "Do ye have something better to do?"

"I was planning on spending a quiet afternoon reading." Retrieving her book, she settled it on her lap and flicked to a random page. Bran snorted.

"Why not sit yerself in front of the wall and watch paint peel?"

"I've always enjoyed reading. Haven't you?"

"Dunno," he said with an absent shrug. "Never tried it."

Lilly blinked. "You've – you've never read before?"

"And who would have taught me to do somethin' fancy like that? Yeti?" A note of defensiveness crept into his tone. "It doesn't mean I'm

stupid. I just learned different things. A book isn't going to put food on the table or a roof over yer head now, is it?"

Her heart went out to the little orphaned boy who had been taught to steal but had never learned what treasures could be found between the pages of a book. "I could teach you," she said tentatively. "To read. And to write."

He gave her an odd look. "Haven't ye ever heard ye can't teach an old dog new tricks?"

"No one is too old for an education."

"I...guess it can't hurt anything," he said after a long pause. Lilly smiled.

"No, it certainly can't."

"A common born thief, learnin' how to read and write. Next thing ye know I'll be asking for a seat at parliament." His eyes narrowed. "Don't ye dare tell Jules a word of this. She'll never let me hear the end of it."

"I won't say a word," she said solemnly.

"Good. Then ye will come with me to the Mayfair Gardens?"

She looked pointedly down at her book. "Or we could begin our first lesson."

"Did I mention there's a secret gazebo?" Blue eyes darkening to slate he leaned over the bench, bracketing her between his arms as he whispered in her ear, "It's hidden behind a grove of trees. Ye wouldn't even know it was there unless ye knew where to look. Lover's Lookout, they call it. There's even a bench in the middle. Just the right size for f--"

Lilly sprang up so quickly the book went tumbling from her lap.
“Let’s go.”

His husky laugh echoing in the sweet morning air, Bran swept an arm around her waist and nuzzled her cheek. “That’s my girl.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Later that evening...

BRAN LOVED BEING A THIEF. It wasn't just the money (although that certainly didn't hurt). It was the anticipation. The thrill of the chase. The satisfaction of holding all that glittered in the palm of his hand and knowing *he'd* been the one to take it.

Truth be told, stealing a priceless jewel wasn't that much different from wooing a woman. Both involved skill, a little luck, and a lot of charm. As he waited impatiently for the Countess of Littleton to climb into her carriage, Bran's thoughts veered – as they always seemed to do these days – back to Lilly. And he wondered what gem she most embodied.

Not a diamond. Diamonds may have been stunningly beautiful, but they were also cold and common. Neither of which described the delicate blonde who had captured his heart and heated his blood like no other female before her. Neither was she an emerald, or a pearl, or a glittering blue topaz.

Amethyst was the obvious choice, as the violet jewel matched her eyes. But his Lilly was no shy wilting violet. A lady, to be sure (in manner if not blood), but one with a bright, inquisitive mind, strong

will, and the most delectable little mouth he'd ever had the pleasure of tasting.

Despite their arduous lovemaking in the gazebo – and in the carriage on the ride home, and in the parlor, and against the wall in the upstairs hallway – just the thought of those rosebud lips had his cock swelling in his trousers.

Down boy, he thought with a rueful grin as he adjusted his stance. If there was one place he could ill afford a distraction, it was here. Which was why he'd done his best to keep his life with Lilly and his criminal activities completely separate. The world of darkness and shadows was too dangerous for her. Better she not know anything at all than know too much.

He'd shared his...*errands* with other lovers in the past. Mostly because, as callous as it seemed, they hadn't meant anything to him. Just as he'd meant nothing to them. But Lilly was different. In a world filled with diamonds, Lilly was a ruby.

A rare gem that could burn both hot and cold, the ruby was the queen of stones and the stone of kings. Nobility had favored the captivating red jewel for thousands of years, believing it brought them courage, protection, and - if one believed in such things - true love.

Suddenly a flash of movement at the front of the house caught his eye.

"About bloody time," he muttered under his breath when the countess finally emerged and stepped into the carriage that had been waiting on the side of the street for the better part of an hour. A slash of the whip and she was off, leaving her home - and the sapphire

brooch she'd recently acquired at auction - unguarded save for two maids, a footman, and a butler who had the bad habit of indulging in too much whiskey.

It was because of the butler (and his loose tongue) that Bran had learned of the brooch in the first place. He'd overheard the poor sot talking about it at a local pub. After tracking his movements for the better part of two weeks he had finally approached the butler and, after plying him with an entire bottle of fifty-year-old whiskey, learned everything he needed to know, including where the countess kept her jewelry and when she'd next be away.

Like Juliet, Bran had been planning on laying low until Bow Street's interest shifted elsewhere, but the brooch was too tempting a prize to resist. A wedding present commissioned by the late Duchess of Kensington by her husband, it was worth a small fortune and he'd already lined up a buyer through Yeti. Everything was set. The only thing left to do was to steal the damn thing.

Darkness had long since descended over the city, allowing him to move as stealthily as a shadow across the lawn to the servant's entrance at the rear of the house. The narrow wooden door was unlocked - they always were - and he made his way up to the countess' dressing chamber without incident.

His mouth curving in a triumphant grin when he found the brooch precisely where the butler told him he would, he plucked the jewelry from its velvet box and held it up. Moonlight reflected off the brooch, turning the blue sapphire to liquid cobalt. That had been bloody easy. *Too easy*, he thought even before the hairs on the nape of his neck

prickled and the creak of a step cut through the silence like a gunshot.

Bran slipped the brooch into his pocket and drew his pistol just as the door flew open and a lean, rangy man with dark-hair and eerily black eyes. Side whiskers extended down past his jaw and his hair was long and unkempt. If Bran didn't know any better he'd think another thief was trying to filch his take, but the bloke standing before him, while disheveled in appearance, was no common criminal.

"If it isn't Tobias Kent," he drawled. "Out for a midnight stroll, are we?"

"It's a nice night." Irish by birth and a Runner by trade, Kent was a quiet, unpredictable sort. This wasn't the first time the two men had crossed paths. They'd had a run-in six months ago in Fleet Ditch that had nearly ended with Bran in shackles. He'd managed a narrow escape and Kent, the rutter, had been dogging his heels ever since.

"Aye, that it is." Bran's eyes narrowed. "I take it the butler was in your pocket the entire time. Good play, that."

"Thank you." Kent's mouth stretched in a humorless smile. "It worked well enough with Spencer."

"Looking for another Runner, are ye?" Not too long ago, Felix Spencer had been the best thief in St. Giles. Until he'd been lured into a trap similar to the one Kent had just set for Bran. But instead of swinging by his neck at dawn, the new captain of the Runners, a commoner by the name of Owen Steel, had made Felix a deal he couldn't refuse: work for Bow Street and all charges would be dropped.

"No," Kent said simply. "We're not. Hands above your head and

face the wall, Sullivan. It's over."

"And what is it ye would like me to do with this pistol here? Aye, that's right," he said when Kent's gaze dropped to the weapon. "I may 'ave been stupid enough to fall for the old drunken butler routine, but I wasn't stupid enough to come unarmed."

"Are you stupid enough to kill a Runner?" Kent's eyes were as dark and fathomless as the night sky as they bored into Bran's. "You're a reasonable man, Sullivan. You know what will happen."

Yes, Bran did know. Which was why he had absolutely no intention of actually shooting Kent. Stealing jewelry was one thing. But the cold-blooded murder of a Runner? All of Bow Street would be on him like fleas on a bloody cat. They'd tear the East End apart and everyone he cared about would be put at risk.

Including Lilly.

Just the thought of her quaking in terror as Runners burst into the house turned his stomach. The sweet lass had never so much as stolen a button, but that wouldn't prevent her from being arrested and dragged down to Bow Street. The bastards would keep her locked up until he turned himself in...and then what would happen to her? He'd be rotting in a prison cell - or worse - and she'd be all alone. Jules would look after her for a while, but he couldn't expect his sister to care for Lilly indefinitely. Soon enough she'd be back out on the street, her situation even more dire than when he'd found her.

Bran's jaw tightened. He wouldn't allow that to happen. No matter what, he'd ensure Lilly was protected. It was a promise he had made her when they'd first met, and it was one he had no intention of

breaking.

“Yer right,” he said flatly. “I am a reasonable man. As are ye. Let’s come to an understanding, Kent.”

The Irishman’s smile was as cold and flat as a copper penny. “The only understanding we’re going to come to is that you belong in Newgate. You’ve had a longer run than most, Sullivan. I’ll give you that. But it’s over.”

“The hell it is.” Knowing he would only have the element of surprise for a split second, Bran pointed the pistol at the ceiling and fired off a single shot.

Thick black smoke filled the air as Bran launched himself at Kent. He managed a quick uppercut to the Runner’s jaw and a hard blow to his kidney before Kent fought back with two hard punches to the ribs.

Grunting and cursing, the two men slammed into an armoire and the combined weight of their bodies sent it toppling over onto its side. One of the doors sprang open and dresses spilled out in a colorful waterfall of muslin and silk. Kent’s heel caught on the edge of a pink skirt and he slipped, nearly falling to his knees. A gentleman would have allowed him to get back to his feet, or at the very least raise his arms to defend himself.

Unfortunately for Kent, Bran was no gentleman.

“Sorry about this mate,” he said grimly as he slammed the butt of his pistol against the side of Kent’s head.

The Irishman crumpled to the floor with nary a sound.

Knowing the bastard was too stubborn to remain unconscious for very long, Bran slipped out the door – after taking another piece of

jewelry for his trouble – and made his way back to St. Giles, using a longer route than necessary to ensure he wasn't followed.

He tended to his wounds in the kitchen, dabbing at a cut above his right eye with a slab of butter and slicing an empty flour bag into strips to bind his ribs, one of which he was fairly certain was broken. Kent may have been a wiry bloke, but he hit like a bloody ox.

Bran's feet felt heavy as rocks as he climbed the stairs to his room where Lilly laid sleeping, blissfully unaware of the events that had just transpired. His heart felt heavy as well, and not just from the blue and purple bruises that were rapidly spreading across his chest.

He knew what he needed to do. What he *had* to do. There was no other choice. Not if he wanted to keep his promise.

But damned if it wasn't going to kill him when he did it.

"I – I DON'T UNDERSTAND." Lilly stared at Bran in bewilderment, her brow creasing as she tried to comprehend what he was telling her. Outside the bedroom window a colorful songbird heralded in another blue sky morning, but the only thing she could hear was the frantic thud of her own heart as it plummeted towards her stomach. "You – you want to end things? Right – right now?"

"Aye. That's the gist of it." Bran turned from the wall to face her, his expression unreadable. "It's been fun, lass. But we both knew it was never going to last forever."

Her gaze flicked to the cut above his right eye. When she'd asked him about it he had told her he'd gotten in a little scuffle, but she knew it was something more. It *had* to be something more. Something

that had turned him from the kind, gentle Bran she knew into a contemptuous stranger that had just coldly informed her their affair was over.

“Did I do something?” Feeling small and powerless, she drew her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs, fingers digging into the soft folds of her nightdress. “Or say something?”

Bran sighed. “I thought we agreed there would be no hard feelings.”

“We did, but—”

“Don’t make this harder than it has to be,” he said tonelessly. “If it’s money ye’re worried about—”

“I don’t care about money!” Lilly burst out. Throwing off the blankets, she jumped out of bed and went to him, flatting her hands against his chest as if she could somehow reach through the hard, callous shell of the man he was pretending to be to the man she knew he was beneath. “Our affair was never about money, or dresses, or – or material possessions. Surely you must know that.”

She waited for him to take her in his arms. To brush his lips across her hair and tell her he was playing some cruel, awful joke. To tell her that she wasn’t just another mistress. That she was something more. That *they* were something more.

But he did none of those things.

“I knew this would happen. It always does.” Where there had once been compassion in his eyes she saw only pity. “Ye fell in love with me, lass. It’s all right. There’s no shame in it. I wish I could say the same, but I’ve always found that particular emotion to be a little dull for my tastes.” Taking her by the wrists, he gently pushed her back

one step, then two. “Let’s not ruin what we had, aye? I’ll see that you’re taken care of, just as I promised. Ye’ll want for nothing. There’s a nice flat in Berkley Square—”

“I don’t want anything from you,” Lilly spat as anger began to grow between the cracks of her despair. She’d allowed Doyle to take all of her pride when he’d left. She’d be damned if she let Bran do the same. “I’ll be just fine on my own.”

Something flickered in his eyes. “Don’t be foolish, lass. Ye need someone to look after ye.”

“Then I’ll find someone. But it won’t be *you*.” She lifted her chin. “I always knew our affair would end, Bran. But it didn’t have to end like this. Although what did I expect?” Her laugh tasted bitter on her tongue. “You’re a rake, after all.”

“Lilly—” He reached for her arm when she moved towards the door, but she slapped his hand away, feeling a grim sense of satisfaction at the sharp sound of flesh striking flesh.

“I’m no longer your mistress, which means you have no right to touch me.” She stopped in the doorway to look back at him over her shoulder. Tears glistened on her lashes, but her voice was strong and for once she didn’t stutter. “I’ll see that you’re paid back every shilling for what you spent on me, and then I’ll be leaving London for good. Good bye, Bran.”

BRAN WAITED UNTIL Lilly had closed the door before he staggered over to the nearest chair and sank down into it, burying his head in his hands.

That had been even worse than he imagined. A thousand times worse. But it had been for the best. If he'd tried to let her down gently...if he'd told her how he really felt...

He never would have been able to let her go.

That knowledge, coupled with the fact that this was the only way to truly protect her, allowed him to eventually pick up his head. Pinching the bridge of his nose until black dots danced behind his eyelids, he drew a deep, shuddering sigh. The look on her face...God, he was a bastard. But at least he was a bastard who knew the woman he loved was safe.

If Kent ever managed to find him, Lilly would be far away. There would be nothing to link the two of them. Nothing to send the Runners sniffing after her. Now the only thing left to do was get her the hell out of London and back to Blooming Glen where she belonged.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ten Months Later

West End of London

“IS THERE ANYTHING else you need while I’m out?” Lilly asked Bea cheerfully. Adjusting the wicker basket she carried so it sat in the crook of her elbow, she brushed a hand through her newly sheared locks, still unable to believe she’d allowed the dressmaker to talk her into cutting her long hair into loose waves that barely touched her shoulders.

She did have to admit the style was certainly lighter and less demanding, although she was having a devil of a time keeping it contained. *More pins*, she thought, silently adding them to the other items on her list.

Every Tuesday, like clockwork, she ventured into Haversham Square to purchase all of the supplies Bea needed for the week. Sometimes it was something as small as a pair of new shears, other times she lugged back entire bolts of cloth wrapped around heavy wooden rods. Today the list was as long as her arm and included everything from sewing thread to silk flower embellishments.

“No.” Her round cheeks flushed from the heat of an uncommonly

warm spring day, Bea sprang out from beneath the skirt of one of her patrons and gestured for the woman to step down off the measuring pedestal with an impatient sweep of her arm. “Come back in three days for your final fitting,” she instructed. “And if you eat any more crumpets there’s no corset tight enough that’ll help cinch in that waist. Understand?”

Lilly bit back a grin as the woman gave a meek nod and scurried from the room. “Wasn’t that the Marchioness of Hatfield?”

“She’s a duchess now, I think.” Bea tapped her chin, then shrugged. “Either way, if she keeps stuffing her face with sweets there’s no amount of altering that will save that dress. It’s already near to bursting at the seams.”

“I’m certain you’ll make it work,” Lilly said confidently. “Are you sure there’s nothing else you need at the market?”

Bea rolled her neck from side to side and released a weary sigh. The marchioness had been her fourth fitting of the day and she still had five left to go. With the last ball of the Season right around the corner every duchess, countess, and lady was scrambling to ensure their gowns were perfectly tailored.

Nine months ago Bea couldn’t have dressed a baroness if she’d paid her. Then, on one fateful autumn day, a diminutive blonde had wandered into Bea’s shop completely by accident and fallen in love with one of the seamstress’s original designs. She’d ordered an entirely new wardrobe on the spot and it wasn’t until after the *ton*’s elite began knocking down Bea’s door that she realized the blonde had been none other than Lady Ware, an esteemed Almack’s patroness.

Exactly two days later fate intervened yet again when Lilly appeared on Bea's doorstep desperate for a job. Overwhelmed by the influx of new clients Bea had hired her on the spot, and the two women had been working side by side ever since. Lilly may not have had Bea's eye for design or skill with a needle, but her gentle demeanor and soft spoken nature kept their customers coming back when Bea's abrasiveness would have otherwise driven them away.

"Not that I can think of. Bloody hell," Bea muttered when the bell on the front door rang out, indicating her next client had just arrived. "Like rats fleeing a sinking ship."

"I believe that is my cue to leave." Tugging on the brim of her bonnet so it shaded her eyes, Lilly stepped into the waiting room to greet the young debutante who had just entered the shop accompanied by her harried looking mother.

"Lady Norfolk," she said warmly. "Lady Abigail. It's a pleasure to see you again. Miss Bea is ready for you."

"Oh dear." Lady Norfolk's gaze darted to the heavy velvet curtain separating the waiting room from the dressing room. "Does this, er, mean you will not be staying?"

"I'm afraid I have a few errands to run. Don't worry," Lilly said in a whisper when Lady Norfolk's face drained of all color. "You're only her fifth fitting of the day. She won't start throwing things until at least the sixth."

"You're looking lovely today Miss James," Abigail piped up. "Are you meeting a suitor?"

Lilly's smile faltered. "I – no, no, nothing like that. I'm just picking

up supplies.”

“Well maybe you’ll meet a handsome man at the market.” Abigail’s eyes lit up. “Wouldn’t that be romantic? You could fall in love over the butcher’s block.”

“Perhaps,” Lilly said evasively. “If you’ll excuse me, I really must be going. Good luck with your fitting.”

“Thank—” Abigail began, but Lilly was already out the door and racing down the sidewalk as fast as her legs would carry her.

When she rounded the corner she flattened herself against the brick wall of Mrs. Violet’s Tea Shop and pressed a hand over her racing heart. A cool breeze stirred the air, brushing against the tiny dots of perspiration that dripped from her brow and the stinging tears that burned the corners of her eyes.

Foolish woman, she scolded herself. *Foolish, foolish woman*.

It had been ten months since she’d seen Bran. Ten months since she’d kissed him. Ten months since he’d broken her heart. And yet all it took was one harmless word to feel the pain all over again.

How long, she wondered bleakly. *How long until someone can mention a suitor and I don’t immediately think of him?*

In the first few weeks she’d thought of him every day, every hour, every minute. Her tears could have filled the Thames, and she had never felt so wretched in all of her life. She thought she’d experienced heartbreak when Doyle left her...but it was *nothing* compared to what she felt after Bran cast her aside.

It wasn’t just that he’d ended it. It was *how* he’d ended it. With such cruel, baffling cruelty when he had shown her nothing but kindness.

With no explanation when she at least deserved a reason why. With no warning...and no means to defend herself against the gut wrenching pain of having her heart torn asunder.

For nights she'd laid awake, unable to sleep for the echo of his voice running through her mind.

It's been fun, lass.

Let's not make this harder than it has to be.

If it's money ye're worried about...

With the help of Bea and the gradual passage of time she'd eventually begun to think of him less and less, but he was still just a memory away. She had only to glimpse a blond head in a crowded street and she instantly remembered the way his hair curled over his brow. Had only to hear a husky chuckle to recall the sound of his laughter. Had only to see a couple together to be reminded of how it had felt when she and Bran were together and her heart was whole and every day shone brighter than the last.

She'd told herself she would get over him eventually. That she would move on and find true love again. But what if she never did?

Then you'll be all the better for it, her head said. Men – nothing but trouble if you ask me.

Her heart, as it had been for ten long months, remained silent.

Pushing away from the brick wall – and pushing Bran from her mind – Lilly hurried on her way to Haversham Square. She knew better than to dally, and Bea would have her head if she wasn't back within the hour.

Mentally consulting her list, she began at one end of the square and

began to make her way through the myriad of stalls, tents, and carts where vendors hawked everything from fresh cuts of meat to baskets filled with mewling kittens.

Once she'd fawned over the kittens and completed her second purchase – after haggling the price down five pence – Lilly's mood lightened considerably. Going to the market was one of her favorite errands. She loved the bustling pace of it. The sights and sounds. The eclectic mix of old and new.

When someone jostled her from behind she thought nothing of it. The square was crowded, and space was at a premium. Making certain her reticule was safely hidden in the folds of her dress she simply continued walking, shading a hand across her brow as she searched for the tent with sewing supplies. But when she was shoved again – harder this time – she stopped short and whirled around, eyes narrowing as she clutched her basket to her chest and scanned the crowd.

Pickpockets were a dime a dozen at the market and if one wasn't careful they'd find themselves leaving with nothing more than the clothes on their back. They were also quick little buggers and, being mostly children, were able to disappear into a crowd faster than a person could blink. Which was why she wasn't surprised when she didn't see anyone suspicious.

"Better luck next time," she called out, earning a few sideways glances from random passerby. Taking care to ensure her belongings were safe and secured, she started to turn back around...and slammed face first into someone's chest.

“Oh!” Dazed, she shook her head and tried to step back. “I’m sorry, I didn’t – what are you doing?” Confusion quickly gave way to fear when she found her wrist locked in a hard, unyielding grip. “Let me go!”

She began to struggle in earnest when her assailant’s grip tightened and he began to drag her behind one of the tents to a shadowy alley that was blocked off with wooden crates.

“Help me!” she cried. “Someone help!”

But no one heard her above the din.

Her basket went flying when she was shoved between two of the crates. She fell to her hands and knees, her delicate gloves tearing on the rough cobblestones. Breath coming in fits and starts she tried to scramble to her feet, but a hard blow sent her sprawling onto her stomach.

“Fight all you want, whore.” The man’s dark, merciless voice sent chills racing down her spine. “You can’t escape your fate.”

Tears born of terror and desperation flooded Lilly’s eyes and poured down her cheeks as she blindly reached for something, anything, she could use to protect herself. Hand closing over a splintered piece of wood, she rolled onto her back and slashed upward with all of her strength.

Her assailant hissed out a curse when the makeshift weapon sank into his thigh. Blood, thick and red, pulsed from the wound when he yanked the wood out. Throwing it aside he advanced on Lilly with a menacing growl. “You’ll pay for that.”

A scream tore itself from Lilly’s throat when he drew out a knife,

the silver blade long and curved and sharp. His mouth, the only part of his face not obscured by shadow, curled in a sinister grin of pure evil.

“Whore,” he whispered. “Trollop. Harlot. Prepare to answer for your sins!”

He raised his arm and Lilly squeezed her eyes shut, inwardly bracing herself for the pain that was to come. Time itself seemed to slow, seconds turning into hours. She held her breath. Waiting... waiting...

“I say! What the devil is going on here?”

With a startled gasp Lilly opened her eyes and nearly wept in relief when she saw her assailant was gone. In his place was a kind looking stranger who was gazing down at her in concern, wheat colored brows pulled in tight over the bridge of his nose.

“Are you all right, miss? I heard you scream and came as quick as I could.”

“No.” She shook her head emphatically from side to side. “I’m not all right. I mean – I mean I am, now. But I wasn’t – I wasn’t a minute ago. There was a man. He had a knife. I don’t – I don’t know where he went!” She began to tremble as her gaze darted wildly around the alley, searching the shadows for a glimpse of her assailant, but it was as if he’d disappeared into thin air.

“Easy,” the stranger murmured when her entire body started to shake with tiny little after-shocks of fear. “Here, let me help you up.” He pulled her to her feet and placed his greatcoat over her shoulders. “Let’s go somewhere we can sit and you can tell me what happened.

Would you like some water?"

"Y-yes please, Mr..."

"Ferguson. Ian Ferguson. What's your name?"

"L-Lilly James."

"Miss James. I wish we were meeting under more pleasant circumstances, but I can assure you that you have nothing to fear. You're safe now." Gently holding onto her arm, he guided her out of the alley to a small bench underneath the shade of a dogwood tree. Fetching a glass and pitcher from a nearby vendor, he poured her a glass of water. "I'm a Runner. I was on a nearby patrol when I heard you scream." His mouth flattened into a grim line. "I only wish I had gotten to you sooner. Are you hurt?"

"Just – just my hands. I scraped them when I fell. When he pushed me," Lilly corrected. She shook her head dazedly, feeling for all the world as if she'd just woken up from a terrible dream. "He pushed me into the alley. I tripped over the crates."

"Did he tell you his name?" Ian withdrew a small leather bound booklet from the front pocket of his waistcoat and began scribbling down notes. "Or why he was trying to hurt you?"

"No. No, he didn't tell me his name or what he wanted. He just...he just appeared in front of me and grabbed my wrist. I – I tried to fight him, but he was so – he was so *s-strong*."

"Take a breath," Ian suggested when her voice broke and she pressed her fingers to her lips. "And a sip of water. There you go."

As the cool liquid traveled down her throat, Lilly struggled to gain control of her emotions. She'd seen violence before. Working and

living in the East End for as long as she had, how could she not? But there was a difference between seeing a knife drawn on someone and having a knife drawn on oneself.

It was the metallic taste of metal in her mouth as she bit her tongue. The aching in her chest as she struggled to fill her lungs with air. The cold-blooded certainty that she was going to die. And the awful, choking realization that there were still so many things she wanted to do.

She wanted to travel. To see the white beaches of Spain and the wild moors of Scotland.

She wanted to see her family again. To hug them close and ask for their forgiveness.

And she wanted to fall in love. Desperately, wildly, unapologetically in love. The type of love she thought she'd had with Bran.

But if Ian hadn't arrived when he did all of those things she wanted to do and all of those memories yet unlived would have been snatched from her in the blink of an eye. If that wasn't violence, she didn't know what was.

"He called me names. Horrible, awful names." She bit the inside of her cheek. "I don't dare repeat them."

"You don't have to," Ian assured her. "But if you could describe him, that would be most helpful. Was he tall or short? Fat or thin? Dark hair or fair?"

"I...It all happened so fast," she said helplessly. "I'm afraid I don't remember."

"You said he spoke to you. What did his voice sound like?"

“He had a deep voice.” Her fingers tightened around the glass. “As deep and dark as a pit.”

Ian nodded encouragingly. “That’s good. That’s very good. Can you recall anything else?”

“His teeth were very white. I know that must sound strange, but...”

“No, no, that’s actually quite helpful. Clean teeth indicates a man who takes pride in his appearance. One who doesn’t smoke or drink to excess, as both cause yellowing of the gums. And one whom is educated enough in personal hygiene to understand the benefits of tooth powder.”

Lilly blinked. “You are able to discern all of that from the color of a person’s teeth?”

Ian flashed her a grin. “I did say I was a Runner.”

So he had. “I do know that he was taller than me. And that’s...that’s all I can remember. I’m sorry. I wish I could be of my help.”

“You’ve been tremendously helpful, Miss James.” Ian snapped his book closed. “I’m just glad I arrived when I did. Pistols are often notoriously unreliable, but at that close of a range I’m afraid the outcome would have most likely been tragic.”

“Oh, he didn’t have a pistol.”

“He didn’t?” Ian frowned.

“No. He had a knife. A long silver knife with a—”

“Curved blade?” Ian interrupted grimly.

“Yes.” Lilly’s brow furrowed. “How did you know that?”

“Because you’re not the first woman this bastard has attacked, Miss James.” His jaw hardened. “But you are the first one who has

survived.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THEY CALLED him the Slasher, Ian told her, and they'd been after him for years. He'd killed at least ten women that they knew about, one of whom had been attacked in broad daylight at a market, just like Lilly.

Not much was known about him other than the fact that he always used a curved blade on his victims and he seemed to murder without rhyme or reason. The only thing the women he killed had in common were that they were women. As far as the Runners knew, Lilly was the only one to have seen his face and lived...even though she couldn't remember what he looked like.

In her nightmares he had the face of a devil. Empty black eyes, fangs for teeth, and horns sprouting from his skull. He chased her round and round in an endless circle and no matter how far or how fast she ran, she always ended up back where she started.

Anticipating that the Slasher might try to come after her again, Bow Street had seen to it that a Runner was stationed outside of her flat and another outside of the dress shop at all times. They were dressed so discreetly that if she hadn't known to look for them she never would have seen them, which she supposed was precisely the point. Even knowing they were there, however, didn't stop her from jumping

at every little sound and looking fearfully over her shoulder more times than she could possibly count.

Thankfully Bea was more than understanding. She gave Lilly little odd jobs to keep her busy and found someone else to run errands at the market. As the days passed, and then the weeks, Lilly gradually began to relax. Surely if the Slasher was going to come for her he would have done it already. The Runners must have thought the same for they eventually stopped following her everywhere she went, their manpower needed elsewhere as they canvassed the entire city day and night for any sign of the Slasher.

A light rain drizzled from a dark, overcast sky as Lilly made her way home from the shop. Buried in invoices, she'd stayed later than she had intended. Bea had left two hours ago on the arm of a handsome gentleman, leaving Lilly to lock everything up when she finished.

It was only half past nine, but the streets felt eerily empty. Pulling her cloak more tightly around her shoulders and drawing up the hood, Lilly increased her step, dashing between the shadows and slowing down in the soft yellow glow of the streetlamps.

When she heard what she thought was the click of a boot heel on stone she stopped short, her heart thumping painfully against the wall of her chest as she whirled around.

"Who – who's there?" Even to her own ears her voice sounded puny and weak. "I – I have a pistol."

It was a lie. Inside the pockets of her cloak she didn't have so much as a sewing needle. Ian had urged her to start carrying a weapon, but

she'd been more afraid of accidentally shooting herself than an assailant. A stupid decision, she reflected belatedly, for what the devil was she supposed to defend herself with? Her reticule?

She was pulling out the beaded purse when a black cat suddenly streaked across the street, its paw striking a tiny rock and sending it tumbling across the cobblestone which resembled the sound Lilly had heard. Tucking her reticule aside, she drew in a deep, uneven breath and released it in a loud *whoosh* of air.

"See?" she said aloud, gaining comfort from the sound of her own voice. "There's nothing to be afraid of. It's just a cat. Stop being such a ninny."

But the large shape that suddenly materialized out of the darkness was no cat, and the knife he held in his left hand was something to be very, very afraid of.

"Hello, whore." White teeth flashing in a cold grin, the Slasher advanced towards her with the slow, purposeful steps of a predator who knew his pretty had nowhere to hide. "I've missed you."

Fear wrapped around Lilly's throat like a vice. "P-please," she croaked. "Don't hurt me."

"Hurt you?" His laugh was long and loud and tinged with madness. "I'm not going to *hurt* you. I'm going to *save* you. One piece at a time."

Moonlight flashed off the edge of the knife's curved blade as he lunged forward. Lilly screamed and tried to run but he grabbed a fistful of her cloak and yanked her back against his chest, his arm coiling around her neck like a snake. She whimpered when his breath wafted across her cheek, the smell of it pungently sweet, like

something rotting from the inside out.

“Don’t worry,” he crooned as he dragged the tip of the knife along her flesh. Blood trickled along the line of her collarbone to pool between her breasts in a macabre necklace of dark red. “This will only hurt for a little bit.”

“Oooh,” THE BARMAID cried as Bran moved inside of her. “Just like that. Harder! Faster!”

Well which one is it, Bran thought irritably as he did his best to accommodate his lover’s ever-changing requests. *Just like that or bloody harder and faster?*

When she flung back her head and came with a garbled yell he decided it didn’t matter. With a few more thrusts he found his own release and it was every bit as underwhelming as he’d feared it would be.

The barmaid, a curvy brunette with dark brown eyes and a sultry pout, was the first woman he’d brought into his bed since he kicked Lilly out of it. The past ten months of self-imposed celibacy hadn’t been something he’d planned on when he ended things with Lilly. He wasn’t a saint, after all. But no matter how hard he tried – and he *had* tried – he couldn’t seem to stop himself from comparing every woman to the one he’d given up. And every woman, no matter how beautiful or intelligent or witty she was, always fell drastically short of the violet-eyed beauty who had captured his heart and left him mourning her absence like a love-struck fool.

Knowing he’d done the right thing was the only thing that kept him

from marching down to her flat (a flat he paid for unbeknownst to her), throwing open the door, and kissing her with all the pent-up passion that had been collecting in his veins for the better part of a year. For as much as he missed her, as much as he bloody loved her, he knew she was better off without him. But knowing something didn't ease the ache in his loins, which was why he'd brought the barmaid home.

A decision he soundly regretted.

It wasn't the barmaid's fault. All of the blame laid with him and his bloody inability to get over Lilly. He'd thought ending his celibacy would be the way to go about it, but too late he realized it had only exasperated the problem.

Once meaningless sex had been enjoyable. A carefree pastime he'd indulged in probably more than he should have. Now it only served as a reminder of what he'd loved...and lost.

"Did ye hear that?" Frowning, Bran untangled himself from the barmaid's clinging grasp when he heard someone knocking on the door. The barmaid sat up with a pout when he pulled on his trousers, leaning back on her hands so her voluptuous breasts were standing at full attention. He barely gave them a glance.

"Where are you going?" she protested. "We were only getting started."

They'd been tugging like rabbits for two hours, but who was keeping track?

"Someone's 'ere. Take this." He tossed a small pistol onto the bed and tucked another into his waistband.

“What am I supposed to do with *that*?” the barmaid sniffed, looking at the gun as if it

“If anyone comes into this room who ain’t me, shoot them.” Arming himself with a knife for good measure, Bran trotted down the steps two at time. “I’m coming, I’m coming,” he called out irritably when the pounding intensified.

Who the devil would come knocking at his door at this hour? Jules was in the country with her new husband – the chit had gone and married the bloody Runner Grant Hargrave of all people – and his mates were still getting drunk down at the tavern where he’d found the barmaid. Maybe she had a jealous husband or lover she’d forgotten to mention...

Cocking the pistol, he unlocked the door and slowly opened it towards him.

“Lilly?” he gaped, nearly dropping the gun when he saw who was standing on his doorstep. Of all the people he’d been expecting, it was safe to say she hadn’t even been on the list. “What the hell are ye doin’ here? Are ye all right?”

As soon as he got a good look at her it was clear she was far from all right. Her pale blonde hair was in wild disarray and her bodice was torn. There was mud splattered across her skirt, as if she’d run all the way here, and there was a gash in her cheek that looked as though it had come from the sharp end of a blade.

There was blood on her neck. More of it on her hands and the bodice of her dress.

“What happened?” he said sharply when she fell, sobbing, into his

arms.

“It’s – it’s the Slasher,” she gasped, lifting terrified violet eyes to his. “He’s trying to kill me.”

“Bloody hell.” Cursing, Bran scooped Lilly up and carried her inside. Stopping only to close the door and lock the door behind him, he proceeded quickly up the stairs and into Juliet’s bedchamber. But when he went to lay Lilly down on the bed she clung to him like a little burr, and his stomach knotted when he saw how afraid she was.

“Please don’t leave me,” she begged, her nails digging furrows into his neck.

“You’re safe, love.” He kissed her cheek and tasted tears. “No one is going to hurt ye here. I just need to go get some things, and I’ll be right back.”

“No!” Her frightened cry tore straight through his heart. “Don’t leave me.”

Ah lass, he thought as he gently stroked his hand through her hair tangled hair. *Who did this to ye?*

Whoever the bastard was...he was a dead man.

“It’s all right, love. I’ll stay right here.” Speaking in low, soothing tones, he sat down on the edge of the bed and cradled Lilly on his lap as if she were a child. With her head tucked into his chest and her eyes closed she was quiet as a mouse, but he could feel the rapid beat of her heart knocking against his ribcage.

Eventually her heartbeat began to slow and with a soft, weary sigh she drifted off to sleep. Waiting until her limbs were heavy and her breathing had deepened, he moved her to the middle of the bed.

A swift, impersonal sweep of his hands across her body assured him nothing was broken or seriously injured. But his jaw tensed when he saw the dried blood between her breasts, and his hands curled into fists of barely controlled rage when he found the shallow cut on her collarbone and another on her right arm.

Someone had hurt his Lilly. Someone had tried to kill her. And when he found who that someone was...he was going to tear him apart.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LILLY WOKE IN a blind panic.

A scream wrenched itself from her raw, aching throat as she sat bolt upright, violet eyes frantic and breaths coming in short, uneven gasps. When she saw a man in the doorway she screamed again, instinctively reaching for the nearest thing she could use as a weapon.

She had the heavy candlestick raised above her head and was ready to throw it when comprehension dawned and she suddenly realized who she was throwing it at.

“Bran.” The candlestick fell from limp fingers and struck the floor with a clang before rolling under the bed. “I – I’m sorry. I didn’t recognize you at first.”

“Ye have nothing to apologize for, love. I’ve brought ye some food. I thought ye might be hungry.” He approached her as cautiously as he had the lioness at the zoo, his blue eyes, so achingly familiar, never leaving hers even when he set the tray down on the bedside table. “There’s sausage and eggs and nut bread with apricot jam, just like ye like it.”

It was silly. Ridiculous, really. But knowing Bran remembered how she preferred her nut bread was enough to flood her eyes with tears. Burrowing her face in her hands she began to cry in earnest while

Bran stood frozen in place at the side of the bed.

“Are ye hurting? Should I fetch a doctor? Bloody ‘ell, I knew I should have gotten a saw bones last night but I thought it was best to let ye sleep. I’ll get one now,” he decided, backing slowly away. Sniffing, Lilly used the sheet to dry her eyes and shook her head.

“N-no. I don’t need a doctor. I’m just...I’m afraid I am a bit overwhelmed.”

“Of course ye are, love. Of course ye are.” Looking visibly relieved that she’d stopped crying, Bran stopped his retreat. “Do ye mind if I sit with ye for a little while?” When she shook her head again he moved a chair over and pulled the lid off the breakfast tray revealing a veritable feast of food that could have easily fed half a dozen people.

Lilly bit her lip. “I’m not very hungry.”

“That’s all right. Ye only need to eat a few bites. For yer strength,” he said as he prepared a small plate.

It wasn’t until the first bite that she realized she actually *was* quite hungry, and in embarrassingly short order she’d devoured everything on the plate. But when Bran offered to make her another she politely declined. “No, thank you. I’ll eat some more later.”

How odd it felt, to address him as if he were a stranger. Bran appeared uncomfortable as well, although she suspected it had more to do with her showing up in his doorstep in the middle of the night covered in blood and less to do with their affair. After all, he’d been the one to end it. Which meant he hadn’t suffered through months of heartbreak as she had. Nor had he been left with unanswered questions, or stayed awake night after night wondering what had gone

wrong.

But in spite of all those things, he'd been the only one she knew she could turn to. The only one she knew would protect her. The only one she trusted with her life...just not her heart.

"I – I suppose you'd like to know what happened." Her gaze fell to her lap as she brushed a few crumbs off the coverlet.

"Only if ye are ready to tell me."

Lilly stilled when he slid his hand over top of hers. The weight was as comforting as it was familiar, and her throat tightened when she remembered all the little ways he used to touch her. A brush of his hand through her hair. The press of his lips against her temple. A playful pinch on her derriere. In bed and out of it he'd never been able to keep his hands to himself.

Once his touches had brought her nothing but happiness and pleasure. Now she felt nothing but pain which was why she slowly slid her hand away and tucked it beneath the coverlet. Eyes fixed on her knees, she began to speak.

"Three weeks ago I was attacked in Haversham Square. A man stepped deliberately in front of me and when I ran into him he dragged me into an alley. He didn't try to rob me. He didn't tell me his name or what he wanted. But he had a knife, and his intentions were all too clear." She heard Bran's short, angry exhalation of breath. Felt the tension radiating off his body in waves. Knowing if she stopped talking or looked at him she wouldn't be able to get through what came next, she kept her eyes downcast and her mouth moving.

"Fortunately, a Runner was on patrol nearby and he heard my

scream. When he came to investigate my assailant ran off. When I told the Runner, Mr. Ferguson, about what had happened he instantly suspected the attacker was a man they called the Slasher.”

“Bloody ‘ell,” Bran whispered.

Lilly’s fingers curled inwards, nails biting into the flesh of her palms as she struggled to keep going. “You’ve probably heard of him. I admit I hadn’t.” *And I wish I never had*, she added silently. “Two Runners were assigned to follow me at all times. But after three weeks went by they thought – as did I – that the Slasher had forgotten about me. Last night I was working late at the shop. I’ve been working for Bea,” she explained, daring a quick glance at Bran.

He sat in his chair as stiff as a statue, his blue eyes as cold and unreadable as she’d ever seen him. A muscle pulsed in his jaw and his hands were curled into fists so tight that all the blood had leeches from his knuckles. Swallowing audibly, she quickly returned her gaze to her lap.

“He came out of the shadows. I thought it was just a cat.” Her mouth twisted in a humorless smile. “*I wish* it had just been a cat. He...he called me a whore, as he had before. And he said that he’d missed me. I tried to run, but he was too quick.” When she closed her eyes she could still smell his breath and her blood as it rolled down her chest. She could taste the fear in her mouth. Could hear the desperation in her voice as she begged for her life. “He – he had his knife, and he–”

“That’s enough,” Bran said sharply.

Lilly’s eyes opened. “But I’m not finished.”

“Aye, ye are,” he gritted out. “I won’t have ye relive what happened to ye. Not when I can see the terror in your face. The only thing that matters is that ye got away. And ye came to me.”

“I’m sorry,” she said reflexively. “I know I shouldn’t have, but I couldn’t think of anywhere else to go.”

“If there’s anyone who should apologize, it’s me.” This time when he reached across the bed and took her hand in his she didn’t resist. She couldn’t. Not when the raw pain in his eyes rivaled the pain in her heart. “This is my fault, love. If I’d not ended things between us, none of this ever would ‘ave happened.”

“Then why did you?” She’d promised herself that if she ever saw him again she wouldn’t risk her pride by asking him why he’d done it. But seeing the regret in the lines etched across his forehead, hearing it in the somber tone of his voice, she *had* to know. “Why did you ruin what we had? I knew it wasn’t going to be forever. But you didn’t have to say the things you did.” When tears once again burned the corners of her eyes she blinked them furiously away. She wouldn’t cry. Not now. Not about this. “You didn’t have to be cruel and callous. You didn’t have to treat me as if I didn’t matter. As if what we had together didn’t matter. Because it did.”

“Ah, love.” His voice breaking, Bran moved to the edge of the bed and pulled her into his arms.

They fit exactly as she remembered; clicking together like two puzzle pieces being snapped into place. Tucking her head beneath his chin like a tiny bird settling into its nest, she closed her eyes and breathed in his scent, letting herself imagine – if only for a moment –

that everything was as it had been before Bran broke her heart.

“I didn’t end the affair because ye didn’t matter,” he said hoarsely.
“I ended it because ye did.”

WHEN LILLY STIFFENED Bran reluctantly loosened his embrace, allowing her to slip free of his arms and sit back against the wooden headboard.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, her winged brows tilting down towards the bridge of her nose. “That – that doesn’t make any sense.”

“I’m a thief, Lilly.” When she continued to look at him blankly he muttered a curse and stood up. Dragging an agitated hand through his hair, he crossed to the nearest window and stared blindly out through the glass at the clear blue sky above. “My life in dangerous. It always has been, and it always will be. Which means those closest to me are in danger as well.”

“Does this have anything to do with the bruises on your face from that morning?”

He braced his hands on the edge of the sill. “Aye. I fell into a trap set by one of the Runners. Tobias Kent.” Just saying his name made Bran’s shoulders tense. “He’s been after me for nearly a year. Were it not for a bit of luck that night, he would ‘ave had me. And then what would ‘ave happened to ye?” He turned to face Lilly, his countenance a myriad of contradictions.

Anger.

Regret.

Fear.

Love.

“The Runners are ruthless. Especially Kent. He’d do anything it took to see me locked away in Newgate, even using those I love to draw me out. Jules has always been a part of this life. She knows the risks, and the dangers. But you, Lilly...” His jaw clenched. “I couldn’t live with myself if something happened to ye because of who I am and what I do. So I did what I thought was right.”

“You ended our affair to protect me,” she concluded.

“Aye.” He gave a clipped nod. “Ye were supposed to go back to Blooming Glen.”

“I am sorry I did not oblige you, but I’m not a doll you can put away in a glass box,” Lilly said acidly.

Bran blinked. “That’s not what I—”

“Did you think I was so naïve that I didn’t understand the risks?”

“No, I—”

“Did you think I was so dimwitted I was incapable of making my own decisions?”

“No,” he growled in frustration. “Lilly, please try to understand—”

“*There* you are, lovie.” Sauntering into the room without so much as a knock, the barmaid looped her arms around Bran’s neck and pressed a smacking kiss to his cheek. “I’ve been lookin’ everywhere for – oh. ‘Ello. Didn’t see you there.” She wiggled her fingers at Lilly before dismissing her with the tiniest of smirks. “Thanks for last night, lovie. You sure know how to show a girl a good time. Come see me again soon, yeah?” And then she was gone, leaving behind a trail of cheap

perfume and a silence fraught with tension.

His color deepening, Bran tugged at the collar of his shirt. "Let me explain—"

"There's really no need. I believe I understand perfectly now." Throwing aside the covers, Lilly swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stood up. "You weren't concerned for my safety or well-being. You simply wanted to be free to sleep with whomever you wished."

"That's not bloody true. She's the first woman—"

"The first woman you've slept with in ten months?" Lilly said incredulously. "Just how naïve do you think I *am*?"

"Lilly, wait." He followed her out of the room and down the stairs, nearly doubling his stride to keep up with her furious pace. "I said *wait*, dammit!" Slamming the front door closed when she wrenched it open, he scowled down at her. "Ye can't leave. It's not safe."

"That's odd." She tilted her head. "I thought it wasn't safe for me here. Now unless you intend on following me to Bow Street, I suggest you step back."

If she honestly believed he had any intention of letting her go anywhere without him she was out of her mind. "Lead the way, love," he said, opening the door. She sailed through it with her chin held high, but when he fell into step right behind her she stopped short and swung around.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, violet eyes flashing.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"You can't go with me to Bow Street. You'll be arrested on the spot."

“Then I’ll be arrested.” He shrugged carelessly. “But I’m not lettin’ ye out of my sight.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Fine,” she said after a long pause. “Have it your way. But don’t think I’ll have a moment’s pity when you’re thrown in irons.”

Shy? Had he ever really thought her shy?

His Lilly wasn’t shy. She wasn’t timid or weak. She wasn’t helpless.

She was a bloody warrior.

And he was a goddamned fool for ever letting her go.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE RUNNER'S HEADQUARTERS was a small, nondescript brick building that had once been the personal residence of their founder, Henry Fielding. A slender black cat with long whiskers and intelligent green eyes meowed a greeting when Lilly and Bran stepped into the foyer.

"Hello," Lilly said politely, kneeling down to scratch the vocal feline beneath her chin.

"I see you've met our secretary, Mrs. Wadsworth." A fair-haired gentleman with hazel eyes and a friendly grin strolled in from an adjoining room. He looked so much like Mr. Ferguson that for a moment Lilly thought it *was* him, until she noted that his chin was a bit broader and his hair, while the same color, was several inches longer.

Brothers, she guessed. If not twins.

"Is Mr. Ferguson here?" she asked.

"You're talking to him, sweetheart." The flirtatious gleam in the Runner's eyes abruptly dimmed when his gaze flicked past her to Bran. "Sullivan," he said curtly. "Finally come to turn yourself in, have you? About bloody time."

"Not exactly, mate." Bran stepped up beside Lilly and wrapped an

arm around her waist, which she immediately shoved aside. She was so furiously angry with him she could hardly *look* at him, let alone stand for him to touch her. They'd walked all the way to Bow Street in bitter silence, and even though she'd felt his eyes on her more than once she'd refused to give him the satisfaction of returning his stare.

It wasn't just the barmaid (although the smirking brunette certainly hadn't helped matters). No. It was the lying. The deceit. The deliberate cruelty. And – worst of all – it was his thinking he knew what was best for her.

There were plenty of women who didn't mind when their lovers or husbands made decisions on their behalf. Lilly wasn't one of them. If Bran truly believed she was danger by being with him, then he should have *told* her. Then she could have decided for herself whether she wanted to stay or go. Instead he'd taken the choice completely out of her hands by ordering her out of his life as if she were a servant.

No, not a servant. A servant was at least given an explanation.

It's been fun, lass.

Let's not make this harder than it has to be.

He'd cast her out as if she were a dog. A cowardly, spineless dog.

And that she could not forgive.

"I really need to speak to Mr. Ferguson," Lilly said firmly. "It is of the utmost importance, Mr..."

"Colin Ferguson, at your service." He flashed another grin. "Ian's my brother, and I'm afraid he's not here at the moment. Anything I can help you with, sweetheart?"

"She's not yer sweetheart," Bran growled. Lilly gave him a warning

glare over her shoulder.

“I’d really like to speak to Ian,” she said. “It’s in regards to...to a case he’s working on.”

For the first time Colin seemed to notice the bloodstains on her dress and the cuts on her cheek and collarbone. His eyes widened. “I thought you looked familiar. I was part of the detail that watched your flat.”

“Bloody bang up job ye did,” Bran scoffed. Lilly gritted her teeth.

“Is there someone else I can speak to? I was – I was attacked again last night.”

“The captain’s in his office. He’ll want to hear about this right away. Follow me. Just her,” Colin said pointedly when Bran started to follow them up a narrow set of stairs. “Not you.”

“I go where she goes,” he said flatly.

Colin shrugged. “It’s your funeral, Sullivan.”

He led them to the second floor and down a narrow hallway to a door at the end. Colin raised his hand to knock, but before he could the door opened and a man with ebony hair and the blackest eyes Lilly had ever seen stepped out. He nodded curtly at Colin.

“Ferguson. I was jus’ talking to the captain about...” His rolling Irish accent faded away as his dark, eerily devilish gaze landed on Bran. “*You*,” he snarled, and Lilly barely had time to dart out of the way before he launched himself at her former lover.

With a loud *crash* that shook the entire house the two men went down like a pile of bricks. Curses and fists flew in equal measure as they pummeled one another and the dull thud of flesh hitting flesh

turned Lilly's stomach. Horrified, she flattened herself against the wall and looked to Colin for help, but instead of trying to stop the fight the Runner was urging them on.

"That's it!" he cried. "Go for the ribs, Kent! Ouch." Colin grimaced when Bran managed to land a hard blow to the Irishman's jaw that snapped back his head and had blood spurting out of his nose. "That had to hurt."

"*What the hell is going on out here?*" the captain bellowed as he slammed open his office door. Tall and broad shouldered with distinguished features, black hair that was beginning to gray at the temples, and blue eyes several shades darker than Bran's, Owen Steel was the sort of man who immediately commanded respect. He'd come to Lilly's flat the day after she'd been assaulted at Haversham Square and she'd been both impressed and intimidated by his no nonsense demeanor.

"It's Sullivan and Kent, sir. They're having a go," Colin provided unhelpfully.

"That much is clear," Owen snapped. "What *isn't* clear is why they're trying to kill each other in *my* hallway. On your feet, men! There's a woman present."

With obvious reluctance Bran and his opponent rolled apart from each other and staggered to their feet. They were both bleeding – Kent from his nose, Bran from the corner of his mouth – and if the hostile glares they were shooting at one another was any indication, their fight was far from over.

"Kent, go get yourself cleaned up," Owen ordered. "Sullivan and

Miss James, in my office if you please.”

The Irishman bristled. “With all due respect, sir, this man is a common thief who should be arrested and—”

“I know who Bran Sullivan is,” Owen said evenly. “Which is why I’m particularly interested as to why he’d risk his neck to escort Miss James here. Be on your way, Kent. Take Ferguson with you.”

“But captain—”

“That was not a suggestion. Sullivan, Miss James, this way please.”

Eager to escape the cramped hallway, Lilly peeled herself off the wall and hurried into Owen’s office. Plainly adorned with a large desk, floor to ceiling bookshelves, and a view of the Thames, the room smelled faintly of sandalwood and beeswax.

Sitting in one of two oversized leather chairs, Lilly crossed her legs at the ankle and did her best not to fidget. She wasn’t looking forward to reliving what had happened to her, but she knew her testimony was of the utmost importance. After all, she was the only woman who had survived the Slasher’s attack. And even though she still hadn’t gotten a clear glimpse of his face, she knew the sound of his voice and the shape of his silhouette.

Surely that was better than nothing.

Owen must have been in agreement, for upon closing the door he immediately went to his desk and pulled out a piece of parchment and a feather-tipped quill. “Here,” he said brusquely, holding out a white handkerchief when Bran sat down beside Lilly. “I don’t want your blood all over my furniture.”

“Your concern is touching,” Bran muttered as he pressed the

handkerchief to his mouth.

“Careful, Sullivan.” Owen’s cool blue stare was unblinking. “Just because you’re soon to be Grant’s brother-in-law now doesn’t mean I’m not of a mind to do precisely as Kent suggested and throw you in Newgate.”

Grant’s brother-in-law? What was Owen talking about?

“Jules is set to marry Grant Hargrave, Steel’s second-in-command,” Bran explained when Lilly glanced at him in confusion.

“The Runner who was after her the night I left the Mermaid?” Her brow creased. “But...why on earth would she do that?”

“What can I say, lass?” The side of Bran’s mouth that wasn’t bleeding quirked in a half smile. “Love makes a person do all sorts of strange things.”

It certainly did. When she felt a traitorous flutter in her belly, Lilly forced her attention away from Bran and refocused it on Owen. “I’m sorry. It’s just – it’s just that Mr. Sullivan and I have not seen each other in quite some time. I was unaware Juliet was engaged, let alone married.”

“I can safely say their union caught us all by surprise.” Owen dipped his quill in a pot of ink and held it poised above the parchment. “I take it this is not a social call, Miss James.”

“No.” Her chest lifted and fell as she drew a deep breath. “Although I wish it were. I was – I was...”

“She was bloody well almost killed, no thanks to ye and yer men.” Bran leaned forward in his chair. “I thought the Runners were supposed to protect the innocent, not leave them alone with crazed

murderers on the loose.”

“You’re right,” Owen said evenly. “Prematurely calling off the watch detail was my mistake, and I take full responsibility. It will not happen again.”

“Yer damn right it won’t as she’s not leaving my sight.”

Lilly looked at Bran in disbelief. “You’re not my guardian or my keeper. You have no right–”

“I protect what’s mine.”

“What’s *yours*?” she all but yelped, her eyes flashing a deep, dangerous purple. “I don’t *belong* to you, you arrogant–”

“As entertaining as I find your little lover’s squabble,” Owen interrupted, “I have a madman slicing up women and only one viable witness. I take it this incident occurred last night, Miss James?”

“Yes,” she said, glaring at Bran. No wonder Kent had tried to kill him. The man was utterly infuriating. “I was walking home from the dress shop.”

“What time?”

“I don’t know precisely...” When had Bea left? Ten minutes after nine, Lilly recalled, as she’d been complaining that her suitor was running late. “Around ten o’clock, I believe.”

“I take it you have a usual route from the dress shop to your flat?”

“Yes, I always walk the same way.” Which was utterly foolish, now that she thought about it. “Down St. James Street and across Broad. The – the attack happened three blocks from my flat.”

“I see.” His brow furrowing, Owen wrote something down, tapped the quill on the edge of the desk, and then looked up. “I realize this

may be difficult, Miss James, but any detail – no matter how small – may be the key to finding this monster. He’s managed to evade capture for the better part of five years. If I have my way, he won’t last another five days.”

“He came out of an alley. One second he wasn’t there, and the next second he was. Like a ghost.” *Or the devil*, she thought with a tiny shudder. “It was dark and he was standing in the shadows so I couldn’t see his face, but I knew at once it was him because he was – he was holding the same knife as before.”

“The one with the curved blade?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say to you?”

She looked at her lap, and her stomach rolled when she saw there was still dried blood underneath her fingernails. “He...he called me a whore. And he said he was going to save me one piece at a time. I tried to run, but he caught the hood of my cloak and dragged me back.” She closed her eyes. “He – he held the knife to my throat. I thought I was going to die.”

“That’s enough,” Bran said sharply. “Bloody hell, man, can’t ye see how difficult this is for her?”

“No,” Lilly said before Owen could reply. “I need to tell him everything.” Her nails dug furrows in the leather arms of the chair. “I don’t want the Slasher to hurt another woman. He needs to be caught and held accountable for his crimes.”

“Go on,” Owen said quietly. “How did you escape?”

“By accident. I knew if I didn’t do something he would kill me, so I

pretended to faint. He lowered me to the ground and I heard him take off his coat. To avoid bloodstains, I presume.”

“What color was the coat?”

“I don’t...wait.” She bit down hard on her bottom lip as she struggled to remember. “Navy blue, I think. With gold buttons.”

Owen’s quill abruptly stilled. “Gold buttons? Not brass? Are you certain?”

“Yes. I mean, I cannot be absolutely certain, but...yes.” She nodded decisively. “They were gold. When he leaned over me I brought my elbow up and hit him right in the nose. He fell back and I – I ran. As fast and as far as I could.”

“I wouldn’t call your escape an accident, Miss James.” Owen’s clear gaze held a distinct note of approval as he studied her. “You kept your wits about you and used what you had to defend yourself. I’ll share the information you’ve given me with the other Runners and we’ll redouble our efforts to find this bastard before he tries to kill again. If there’s anything else you remember, please don’t hesitate to call. In the meantime, I would like to place you in protective custody.”

“P-protective custody? What does that mean?”

“It means they want to lock ye up.” This time when Bran reached for her hand she didn’t try to pull away. “Lilly isn’t a criminal, and I’ll be damned if ye’ll treat ‘er like one. She’s coming home with me.”

Owen frowned. “That’s not a good idea, Sullivan. My men are stretched thin enough as it is. I can afford one, maybe two to guard your residence, but there’s no guarantee—”

“The day a Runner gets within twenty yards of my house is the day

I burn the entire thing to the ground,” Bran said matter-of-factly. “Until ye do your bloody job and catch this rutter, Lilly will be safest with me.”

Owen lifted a brow. “Or I could simply arrest you right now, seeing as you *are* a criminal.”

“Ye could,” Bran acknowledged. “But ye won’t.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I’m worth more to ye on the street than I am sittin’ in a cell. Someone has to know who the Slasher is, and it’s clear they’re not talkin’ to ye.”

“You believe they’ll talk to you?”

Bran shrugged. “Why not? Ye just said I’m a criminal. Like talk to like, captain.”

Folding his arms over his chest, Owen leaned back in his chair. “Very well. If Miss James has no objection, she can remain with you. I suppose I don’t have to mention that her safety is of the utmost importance.”

“I’ll protect her with my life,” Bran said simply.

Lilly’s throat tightened. She’d been about to tell Bran she had no intention of going with him, but her objection died with his solemn vow. If she didn’t know any better, she’d think he was completely serious...and maybe, just maybe, he was.

She was still angry with him. Furiously so. But for the first time in ten months, she felt something other than anger and confusion and sadness.

She felt hope.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LILLY AND BRAN RETURNED to the East End with nary a word spoken between them.

“I would like to send word to Bea,” Lilly said as she proceeded Bran into the foyer. “To let her know what happened, and where I’ll be staying for...for the next few days.”

She dearly hoped it wouldn’t take any longer than that for the Runners to track the Slasher down as she had no idea how she was supposed to live under the same roof as Bran for one day, let alone one week. It felt all too familiar to be back here again...and yet, at the same time, everything was completely different.

Once she and Bran would have leapt into bed the moment the door closed. Now they stood apart in awkward silence, two strangers who knew the taste of each other’s lips...but not the secrets they were hiding in their hearts.

“Are ye hungry?” Bran asked finally. He’d taken off his coat and unbuttoned the top of his shirt, exposing a golden V of skin that automatically drew Lilly’s eye. If only he’d gotten ugly during their time apart, or fat, or slovenly...but he was even handsomer than she remembered, and the spark of attraction she’d felt the first moment their hands touched was still there, sizzling just beneath the surface.

“No. But I would like a bath, and some rest.” She bit her lip.
“Should I use the guest room?”

“Juliet’s bedchamber is twice the size and she’ll be gone for the rest of the month. I’ll have a bath drawn for ye, and a platter of food sent up for when ye’re of a mind to eat.”

Lilly glanced down at her stained dress. “I should also send for my clothes.”

“If anyone goes back to yer flat they run the risk of being seen and followed by the Slasher,” Bran said grimly. “Best use Juliet’s things until we get this whole mess sorted out.”

He was right, of course. It would be stupid to try to retrieve any of her belongings. She just hoped they’d still be there when she returned. “I suppose...I suppose I’ll head upstairs now.” But even after she’d said the words she continued to linger, fingers interlocking as she cast Bran a series of quick, fluttering glances from beneath her lashes.

What was he thinking? It was impossible to tell behind the stoic mask he wore. Not that it mattered one way or the other. He may have been as handsome and charming as ever, but he’d still broken her heart. *No, not broken*, she corrected. *Shattered*. He’d *shattered* her heart. Whether he’d done it to protect her or for his own selfish means, it didn’t change the fact that she’d had to stitch it back together piece by bleeding piece.

And she had no intention of letting him tear her stitches apart.

“I appreciate you risking your life to protect mine.” She met his unreadable gaze without blinking. “But I want to make it clear that this changes nothing between us. When the Slasher has been caught,

I'm leaving. You already hurt me once. I won't let you do it again. I've built a life for myself. A good life. A life I'm proud of." Her chin lifted. "I will not allow you to ruin it."

Without waiting for a response she turned and walked up the stairs.

EVEN THOUGH IT killed him, Bran forced himself to give Lilly her space. For five days and five nights they cohabitated without exchanging more than a handful of words, most of which consisted of cordial 'good mornings' and 'good evenings' and 'enjoy your day'. He'd never been this bloody tense in all of his life, and he knew if something didn't change soon he was likely to explode.

He wanted Lilly so badly he ached. And it wasn't just her body he yearned for, although there wasn't a night that went by where he didn't dream of her beneath him, her ivory skin bathed in candlelight and her eyes dark with desire.

He ached for her smile.

He ached for her laughter.

He ached for the way she used to look at him before he destroyed everything.

If he could have gone back and changed time, he would have done so in an instant. But he wasn't a bloody magician or a witch. He couldn't snap his fingers and take away the pain he'd caused her, nor could he make her forget.

But he could try to make her forgive.

The sun was just setting in a sky blooming with color when he found her in the garden, a book on her lap and a line of concentration

between her pretty brows. She hadn't resisted when he told her that it was safest if she didn't leave the house, and for the better part of a week she'd been dividing her time between the kitchen – who knew the lass had such a skill for baking? – and the garden.

It baffled the mind that she could quietly sit and disappear between the pages of a book for hours on end. He'd taken to watching her through the window, his fingers pressed against the glass as he imagined the occasional smile that flitted across her face was meant just for him.

She looked up as he approached, her expression guarded. "Have you heard from Bow Street? Is something wrong?"

"No." Because he knew better than to try to sit beside her, he pulled up a metal chair. "Nothing's wrong, love." *Other than the Runner's complete and utter incompetence*, he added silently. How long did it take for nine men to track down one? Every day the Slasher awoke a free man was another day Lilly's life was in danger. Although he'd be the first to admit the murdering bastard was excellent at covering his tracks. If anyone in the East End knew where he was, they weren't speaking.

Which only confirmed Bran's inkling suspicion that wherever the Slasher was from, it wasn't the East End.

"I just wanted to come out and talk to ye. I thought it was time we discussed things."

"Oh?" Carefully marking her place in the book with a blue hair ribbon, she set it aside. "And what is it you would care to discuss? The case?"

“No.” He grinded his teeth. “Not the bloody case.”

“Then I’m afraid there’s nothing else we have to talk about.”

“Ye know damn well that’s not true.” He leaned forward, elbows braced on his knees, jaw clenched. “It’s time we both stop walking on eggshells and acknowledge there’s still something between us.”

“I – I’m certain I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said coolly, but he saw the flicker of awareness in her eyes before she managed to conceal it. “There *was* something between us. But you put an end to it.”

“Aye, I know.” A frustrated breath whistled between his lips as he sat back. “I know I did, and I’m sorrier for that than I can possibly say. I was only trying to do the right thing, Lilly. I wanted to protect ye.”

“Instead you hurt me. You *hurt* me, Bran, and you didn’t have to.” She jabbed an accusing finger at the middle of his chest. “You were cruel and selfish and you lied to me because it was easier than telling the truth.”

“You’re right, I did.” There was no reason to deny it. No point in making excuses. “And I was wrong. And if I could go back and do things differently, I would.” He strummed his fingers on the hard edge of his thigh. “I never claimed to be a good man, Lilly. But ever since I met ye I’ve wanted to be a better one. Give me another chance, love. Let me prove that I’m deservin’ of ye.”

“That’s just it.” The book tumbled to the ground as she shot to her feet. “You *don’t* deserve me.”

He watched her storm back into the house. Waited until she’d slammed the door behind her to pick up an empty pot and send it

hurtling at the fence. The ceramic shattered on impact, but the destructive act did not bring him any sense of satisfaction.

Instead he felt only loss...and the achingly bitter taste of regret.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“OVER MY DEAD BODY,” Bran said flatly. “No. Absolutely not.”

It had been eight days since Lilly’s attack, and Owen had called a meeting to discuss the case. Or rather, the lack of a case. Without any leads or any real evidence aside from Lilly’s recollections, the Runners had nothing to go on and Owen had decided it was time for a new approach.

The only problem? His new approach required Lilly to be used as bait.

“Let’s hear him out,” she said quietly even as fear leached the color from her cheeks and had a thin line of perspiration dotting her brow. The last thing in the world she wanted to do was be dangled in front of the Slasher like raw meat in front of a dog, but she couldn’t live the rest of her life looking over her shoulder. Nor could she spend another week with Bran.

The first five days had been hard. The last three had been torture.

Even since he’d confronted her in the garden she’d been unable to stop thinking about him, or the things he had said. How badly she wanted to forgive him! To accept his apology, accept that he’d made a

mistake, and go back to the way things used to be. But if she did that, she would be putting her heart at risk yet again...and this time if it broke she feared there wouldn't be enough pieces left to put it back together.

"I don't need to hear a damn word," Bran growled. He was sitting right beside her, his body so tense his chair was all but vibrating. She didn't blame him for his visible agitation. If *she* were a renowned jewel thief in a room filled with Runners she wouldn't exactly be relaxed. But he'd been adamant about escorting her to Bow Street, and not wanting to get into another argument – or walk by herself, for that matter – she hadn't tried to dissuade him.

"We wouldn't take any unnecessary risks." This came from Ian, who was seated directly across from them. His brother, Colin, was on his left side and Kent, who hadn't stopped glaring daggers at Bran since they'd walked in, was on his right. Owen sat at the head of the table and the largest man Lilly had ever seen stood in the corner behind him. He hadn't spoken a single word since the meeting had begun, leaving her to wonder if he was capable of speaking at all.

"Ian's right," said Owen. "We'd have eyes on Miss James the entire time."

Bran slammed his fist on the table with such force that a pile of papers went flying up in the air. "I don't care if ye have the entire British fleet surroundin' her. The answer is no. Come on, lass." Scraping back his chair, he stood up. "I've heard enough. We're leaving."

"You can go." She met his tumultuous gaze beneath a thick sweep

of lashes. “But I’m going to stay. I want to help, Bran.”

“Lilly–” he began, but she cut him off with a quick shake of her head.

“This isn’t your decision to make. It’s mine. And I want to help.” Squaring her shoulders, she looked past Bran to Owen. “Just tell me what I need to do.”

EXACTLY ONE WEEK later Lilly found herself retracing the steps she’d taken on the night the Slasher had nearly taken her life. It was pitch black, the moon and stars hidden beneath a wall of heavy clouds. By Owen’s orders even the street lamps were dimmed, casting everything into shadow...and creating an enticing web with which to snare the Slasher.

He’d told her to act natural. As if there was anything *natural* about trying to lure a sadistic murderer out of his cave. It was all she could do to remember to keep breathing.

One foot in front of the other, she told herself as she walked quickly across Broad Street and turned towards the flat she hadn’t visited for nearly a month. *Just keep putting one foot in front of the other.*

She knew the Runners were out there, hiding where she couldn’t see them. She knew she was safe. Or at least as safe as she possibly could be. But that didn’t stop her from jumping a foot in the air when she heard a nearby door slam, or choking back a terrified scream when a rat went skittering across her path with half a loaf of bread stuffed between its jaws.

She suddenly, desperately wished Bran was with her. But after he’d

stormed out of Bow Street she hadn't seen or heard from him. For the past seven days she'd been living with Owen and his wife Scarlett, a beautiful blonde with a wonderful sense of humor. It had been her job to distract Lilly from what was to come and for all intents and purposes she'd succeeded swimmingly. But there had been no amount of distractions that could make Lilly stop thinking about Bran.

The hard truth was that she missed him terribly. And try as she might to convince herself otherwise, she was afraid that this time *she* was the one who was being cruel and selfish.

Bran had come to her with his hat in his hands and she'd turned him away. Not only that, but she'd chosen the Runners – his arch nemeses! – over him. The flash of betrayal she had seen in his eyes before he left...it made her chest ache just to think of it.

Trying to protect her heart was all well and good, but what if in the process she lost the heart she was trying to protect? Bran wasn't perfect. He'd said as much himself. But then neither was she. Instead of going into their relationship with an open mind and a hopeful spirit, she'd damned their affair to fail before it ever really began. Was it any wonder, then, that it had done precisely that?

Bran never should have lied to her. But hadn't *she* lied to *him* by not admitting the strength of her feelings? If she'd told him that she loved him, he may never have let her go. But what he'd said in the garden rang true. They couldn't change the past, only the future. Which was why she intended on telling him exactly how she felt.

If she survived the night.

Lilly felt an equal mix of relief and disappointment when she

reached the front door of her flat without encountering the Slasher. Yes, she wanted to stop looking over her shoulder, but despite what she'd told Owen she wasn't exactly keen on the idea of being used as human bait.

Maybe the Runners hadn't been able to find the Slasher because he really *was* gone this time. But no sooner had the thought passed through her mind than the front door swung open, two strong hands closed around her throat, and she was dragged inside.

BRAN WATCHED FROM the shadows as Lilly walked slowly and purposefully down the street. *Like a lamb bound for slaughter*, he thought, his mouth twisting into a scowl that was as dark as his surroundings.

It took every ounce of self-control he possessed not to go out there and demand she come to her senses. But he'd already committed the mistake of making a decision for her, and no matter how hard it was to stand by and allow her to walk into danger, he had no intention of repeating his mistake a second time.

If this was what she felt she needed to do then he needed to allow her to do it. Because she *wasn't* naïve or dimwitted, and as much as he would have liked to set her high on a shelf, she wasn't a doll he could pack away when the mood struck. If he wanted her – and God knew he did – then he needed to let her do this.

But he'd be damned if he had to like it.

While the Runners stuck out like sore thumbs from their various lookout points, Bran moved through the shadows as if he'd been born

into them. Which, given his line of work, he might as well have been. But Lilly wasn't a necklace he was stealing. She was the love of his life. And he'd never be able to live with himself if something happened to her.

When she reached her flat he stayed back, his body wedged between the narrow brick walls of two townhouses. The closest Runner was nearly twice as far away as he, which made him all but bloody useless in Bran's opinion. What did they intend to do if the Slasher *did* show up? Shout at him from afar to put down his knife and surrender? Bran's mouth curled in a derisive sneer. Fat chance of that. Thankfully, it seemed their quarry was either too smart to fall for a trap as obvious as this one, or he'd moved on to greener pastures.

If Bran was a betting man, he'd lay odds on the latter. Then the door opened. And there was nothing he could do but watch helplessly as Lilly disappeared.

HER FIRST INSTINCT was to fight. Clawing and scratching at the gloved hands coiled around her throat Lilly tried to scream, but the only thing she could manage was a choked gasp. Black dots danced in front of her eyes and she could feel her face turning a deep, garish purple as she was dragged through her small parlor and into her bedchamber.

Her lungs burned. Her eyes stung. Her legs kicked feebly.

This is it, she thought dazedly. *This is how I die.*

But as quickly as he'd grabbed her the Slasher abruptly let her go, throwing her down onto the bed as if she weighed less than nothing.

She landed on her back and before she could twist to the side he was on top of her, his knee pressing painfully into her stomach while he held her wrists above her head in a bruising grip.

“*Delilah. Hoyden. Whore.*” He spat each word as if it were a curse, and Lilly flinched when his saliva flew across her face in a sickly sweet spray. He wore a black silk domino complete with mask that concealed the upper part of his countenance save for his eyes which were a rich, dark brown and filled with madness. “You’ll pay for your sins in flesh I will cut from your skin and blood I will drain from your veins. Only then will you be able to rest.”

“Who – who are you?” she croaked, her throat bruised and battered from his punishing grip. “What do...you want?”

Those maddened eyes flashed with ire. “Thou shall ask no questions and receive no answers, for thou has sinned before the Lord.”

“If anyone has sinned, it’s you.” Her only chance, Lilly knew, was to keep him talking and to bide her time for as long as possible. Surely the Runners had seen the Slasher take her. They’d come for her any second, if they weren’t in the flat already. “You’re a *murderer.*”

“Some might call me a savior. You will, before I’m through.”

She trembled with he withdrew his knife and trailed the tip of the blade from the corner of her eye all the way down to her shoulder.

He didn’t cut her. Not yet. But knowing that he could – knowing that at any moment he chose he could gut her like a fish – was almost as terrifying as the act itself.

“Please don’t hurt me. I – I’m not a whore. I’m not a whore,” she gasped when the knife cut into her skin just beneath her collarbone.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“We all have our callings.” He lifted the knife to his mouth and bile rose in Lilly’s throat when his tongue snaked out to lick her blood from the blade. “I am only doing what has been asked of me. God says—”

But whatever God said remained a mystery as a shadow came flying out of nowhere and tackled the Slasher to the ground. Scrambling off the far side of the mattress, Lilly clung desperately to one of the wooden bedposts and watched in horror as Bran and the Slasher grappled for the curved knife. They rolled over once, twice, their bodies so entangled it was impossible to tell who was winning.

Lilly slapped a hand over her mouth to contain a scream when she saw the knife arc high in the air and then stabbed downwards towards Bran’s chest, but with catlike reflexes he rolled to the side the tip of the blade sank into the floor instead.

“Bran! Look out!” Her cry of warning echoed through the small bedchamber when the Slasher removed a smaller knife from the inside of his coat. Bran, thinking his opponent had been disarmed, was caught off guard and he grunted in pain when the sharp blade buried itself between his ribs.

“To hell with this.” Staggering to his feet, he yanked out a pistol and drew back the hammer. The first shot was deafening and caught the Slasher in the shoulder. “I hope that hurt, ye bloody bastard.”

His eyes wild, his mouth contorted in a hideous snarl that was more demon than man, the Slasher turned...and threw himself out the window.

“Bran!” Ignoring the shards of glass covering the floor, Lilly ran to Bran and threw her arms around him. Wincing only slightly when she accidentally brushed against the knife that was still protruding from his side, he wrapped her in a tight embrace.

For the span of a dozen heartbeats they simply held onto one another, rocking from side to side as they realized how close they’d each come to losing what could never be replaced. Bran was the first to step back.

“Are ye hurt? Did he hurt ye?” Looking her up and down, his eyes flashed when he saw the blood trickling from the tiny cut beneath her collarbone. “I’m going to tear him limb from limb,” he snarled as he started towards the window. Clinging to his arm for dear life, Lilly struggled to hold him back.

“No. No, don’t go after him. Please. I just – I just want to go home,” she implored. “Let the Runners deal with it. Please, Bran. Just take me home.”

He looked back at her, and whatever he saw caused his expression to soften and the fury to fade from his eyes. “All right, love. Let’s go home.”

EVEN THOUGH SHE told him he was being ridiculous, that *he’d* been the one who had been stabbed, not her, Bran insisted on carrying Lilly up the stairs and laying her gently on his bed. Pausing only to light a candle and set it on a nearby table, he stretched out beside her and immediately pulled her into his arms.

“I’ve missed this,” he said huskily.

“I’ve missed *you*,” Lilly whispered, tipping her head back in order to meet his gaze. “I’m sorry it took all this to make me realize how much.”

“Ye have nothing to apologize for, love.” He placed a tender kiss on her brow. “Ye never did.”

Lilly’s mouth curved in a rueful smile. “As much as I’d like to think I was that perfect, the truth is...the truth is I’ve been afraid.”

“Of the Slasher?” He brushed a curl behind her ear. “Ye don’t have to fear him ever again, love.”

“Well yes, of course the Slasher, but what frightened me even more was falling in love. After...after Doyle left, I thought my entire life had ended. But then I met you, and I realized my life was only beginning. It scared me, to realize that if I allowed myself to love you I would be risking my heart all over again.”

“And I hurt ye,” Bran said grimly, “just as ye feared I would.”

“You did,” she acknowledged. “But now that I understand *why* you did, I can forgive you. More than that, I can thank you. If not for our time apart, I might have never realized how important you were to me. How important you *are* to me. I love you, Bran.” She smiled up at him. “I think a part of me fell in love with you on the night that we met, and a part of me remained in love with you all of those months we were apart. But now I want more than a part. I want everything. Both the good and the bad. The easy and the hard. The simple and the complicated.”

“Do ye know how happy that makes me to hear ye say that?” Lowering his head, he claimed her lips in a long, slow, drugging kiss

that made her toe curl. “I love ye as well, lass. More than I ever thought possible. Which is why I want ye to be my wife.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Your – your wife?”

“Aye. I’ll be the first to admit ye do make a fine mistress. One of the best I’ve ever had, but–”

“*One* of the best?” she interrupted, arching a brow.

He grinned wolfishly. “The top five, at the very least.”

“Bran Sullivan, you *are* a rake.”

“I am indeed, love. So what do ye think about taking this rake as your husband?”

“I think there’s nothing I would like better.” Smiling, she slipped her hands behind his neck and drew him down for another kiss.

EPILOGUE

“WELL?” Steeping his hands on the edge of the table, Owen’s gaze traveled around it as he met each one of his men’s eyes in turn. After a night spent searching the entire city from top to bottom they were all filthy and exhausted. “Any sign of him?”

Ian shook his head. “No, captain. I’m afraid not.”

“He couldn’t have disappeared into thin air. He has a bullet in his shoulder, for God sakes, and most likely a broken leg from jumping out the damn window.” Grinding his teeth together in frustration, Owen poured himself a glass of whiskey before passing the bottle around the room. Everyone with the exception of Kent took a swig.

At the far end of the table the Irishman sat wrapped in brooding silence, his eyes as dark as Owen had ever seen him. *Poor bastard*, he thought silently. Out of all of them Kent had the most personal reasons to want the Slasher dead. Owen had never met his young wife, but he knew she’d been pretty. One of the prettiest women in all of London.

Until the Slasher got to her.

“Get some rest,” he ordered. “We’ll regroup tomorrow morning.”

“That’s it?” Kent demanded. It was the first time he’d spoken since Owen had convened the meeting. “You’re just giving up?”

“No one’s giving up.” Grant Hargrave, Owen’s second-in-command,

had returned from his honeymoon yesterday afternoon. He'd been away for the better part of two months, but from the instant he walked into Bow Street it was as if he'd never missed a day.

"We need sleep and food, Kent." Colin rubbed his hands down his face. "No use trying to go after the Slasher if we're half dead on our feet."

"To hell with that." Kent's chair crashed to the floor as he stood up. "And to hell with all of you."

"Kent—" Colin began, but Owen shook his head.

"Let him go," he said. "He has to fight his own demons."

"And if he loses?" Grant asked.

"Then heaven help us all."

REST? The captain wanted him to rest?

Bugger that, Kent thought as he ducked down an alley. He could rest when he was dead...or the Slasher was.

They'd been so damn close he could smell the bastard's blood on his hands. But once again, despite all the odds, he'd managed to slip away.

The damned Slasher was like a cat with nine lives. Eventually, however, his luck going to run out...and Kent was determined to be there when he did.

His thought as dark as the storm clouds rolling in off the Thames, he didn't notice the carriage until it was too late. The driver shouted a warning and tried to rein in his team of horses, but one of them hit Kent square in the chest as he tried to lunge out of the way. Another

struck his head with their hoof as he fell to the ground. He saw a flash of bright light...and then there was only darkness.

“DO YOU THINK he’s dead?” Poking the dark-haired man with the tip of her parasol, Lady Amelia Tattershall crouched down to get a closer look. “He doesn’t look dead,” she decided after noting the shallow rise and fall of his chest. “Best put him in the carriage, Higgins.”

“In the carriage, my lady?” her driver asked, visibly aghast that she would dare suggest such a thing.

“Well we can’t just leave him here.” Rolling her eyes, she tapped her parasol against the tip of her boot as she watched Higgins and the footman struggle to lift the stranger. “Do be careful,” she cautioned as they more or less tossed him onto one of the velvet-lined seats. “Mother will have a fit if she finds blood on the upholstery again.”

“Where do you want us to go?” Higgins asked.

“Go?” Amelia blinked. “Why, I want you to go home, of course. Where else would we go?”

“The nearest body of water?” her driver suggested.

“Don’t be silly, Higgins. It’s obvious the man is still breathing. If he expires before we reach our destination *then* you can have him tossed in the ocean, but not before. Is that understood?”

“Her Grace isn’t going to like this,” Higgins predicted ominously as he gathered the reins.

“You’re probably right,” Amelia agreed cheerfully. “But then when does my mother like anything I do? Home, Higgins, and be quick

about it.”

Hopping into the carriage, she sat down across from her unconscious guest and regarded him with a bright smile. “Don’t worry. Higgins’ bark is worse than his bite. It’s Mother you really have to look out for. But what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her, will it?”

As the carriage lurched forward Amelia braced her feet on the floor to steady herself, her gaze never leaving the stranger’s pale face. He was certainly handsome, she decided. Bold slashing brows and high cheekbones that gave way to firm lips and a strong jaw. A layer of dark bristle clung to his chin and extended all the way down to his neck, giving him a rather piratical appearance...and making her wonder what he would look with an eye patch.

“Dangerous,” she whispered, her gaze lighting with excitement.

Just the sort of man she’d been searching for....

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jillian Eaton grew up in Maine and now resides in Pennsylvania. When she isn't writing, Jillian is doing her best to keep up with her three very mischievous dogs. She loves horses, coffee, getting email from readers, ducks, and staying up late finishing a good book.

She isn't very fond of doing laundry.

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Read on for an exclusive excerpt from the next Bow Street Brides book, a full-length novel featuring Tobias Kent and Lady Amelia Tattershall!

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A DANGEROUS TEMPTATION

Bow Street Brides #5

PROLOGUE

If Tobias knew what he would find when he returned home, he wouldn't have stopped to get the flowers.

The daffodils beckoned to him across the crowded market square. They were bright and yellow and cheerful; a welcome splash of color amidst the dull and the dreary. He imagined Hannah's face when he presented them to her, and even though the two pence he dug out of the bottom of his pocket cost dearly, he would have gladly paid thrice the amount just to see his wife's smile.

"Thank ye kindly," he said, tipping his hat to the vendor.

"Are those for a sweetheart?" the older man asked.

"Aye." Tobias grinned broadly. "The sweetest."

Tucking the bouquet under his arm and whistling a cheerful Gaelic tune under his breath, he set off towards home on the outskirts of Southwark. The one-bedroom flat was a humble place, but then he and Hannah were humble people, both having come from large

families rich in love and poor in everything else.

But they had dreams, he and his Hannah. Big dreams. They wouldn't live on the wrong side of the Thames forever. One day they'd look out their front window and see a lovely green park instead of brick and broken glass. One day they'd take their children on walks through Grosvenor Square instead of Seven Dials. One day he'd bring his Hannah enormous bouquets of pink roses instead of wilting daffodils.

One day.

Cutting through a narrow alley, Tobias started to walk faster, eager to see his wife after an entire night of being apart. He worked down at the docks, using his brawn and quick fists to keep the rats and pickpockets away from the mercantile ships before they were unloaded. Hannah was a seamstress who went from house to house, fixing the hemlines of fancy ladies and the cuffs of arrogant gents.

Their schedules were completely opposite, but every morning there was a single hour where they intersected. A single hour where they could sit across the crooked table he'd found behind a tavern and smile and laugh and simply drink in the sight of one another. A single hour where their worries ceased to exist and anything seemed possible. A single hour where they filled their future with dreams.

Tobias treasured that hour more than diamonds. He turned left out of the alley, eager for it to begin...and then slowed, his brow creasing, when he saw a cluster of people standing around something in the middle of the street. His first thought was that another drunkard had been struck down by a passing carriage. But such a sight was common,

and hardly grounds for a large spectacle.

“You there,” he said, placing his hand on the shoulder of a young lad who was straining to see through the growing crowd. “What’s happened?”

The boy turned. His narrow face flush with excitement, he said, “There’s been a murder.”

“A murder,” Tobias repeated. Unfortunately that, too, was far too common in this area of London. They weren’t in St. Giles or one of the other rookeries that infested the city like a bad case of the pox, but they were close enough that the occasional bouncer stumbled through on his way to the next pub. A temperamental word or a flash of coin was all it took for a knife in the belly and then another body would turn up floating in the Thames or, if the murderer was feeling lazy, left out on the street for the birds to find in the morning.

Such was the cost of being too poor to live behind large gates and heavy doors guarded by footmen and butlers. It was the main reason Tobias wanted to leave Southwark once and for all. It was why he worked himself to the bone every night. Why he staggered home every morning instead of drowning his sorrows in a pint like all of the other dock workers. Why he refused to give up on his dream of a better life even when that life felt too far out of reach.

One day, he reminded himself even as an unexplained knot of unease coiled in his belly.

“What’s everyone standing around for?” he asked the lad. “You’d think a nabob died.”

“Not a nabob,” said the boy, shaking his head. “A woman. And

whoever it was cut ‘er up real good.”

The knot in his stomach tightened. Tobias didn’t know why. He had no reason to think the woman was Hannah. No reason at all. He glanced down at the daffodils. His wife was safe in their flat, no doubt wondering where he was. But if that was true, why couldn’t he stop the prickling of apprehension working its way up his spine?

“Move,” he ordered gruffly, fighting his way through the crush of bodies. People were murmuring excitedly amidst themselves which only served to heighten the unshakeable feeling of disquiet that had settled over him like a heavy cloak. He hadn’t seen Southwark this worked up since the baker went mad with jealousy and killed his wife and his wife’s lover. Although to be fair, the residents hadn’t been bothered by the murders so much as the temporary lack of bread. But this didn’t feel like that. There was something in the air. Something rotten. Something dark. Something wrong.

Shoving between two men, one of which was holding a notebook and pencil, he stopped short at the sight in front of him. The bouquet of daffodils fell to the ground as he stared, disbelieving.

And then he fell to his knees.

Blood, red and wet and awful, stained his trousers as he lurched across the cobblestones and reached for Hannah. It trickled down his wrists as he lifted her onto his lap. It filled his nostrils as he cradled her head against his chest. There was more blood than there was Hannah, and he knew she was dead even before he started shouting, for how could someone live with no blood in their veins?

“Help,” he cried desperately to the wide-eyed crowd who

collectively stepped back to form a loose circle around him. “Help us. For the love of God, someone help us!”

No one stepped forward because there was no help to give. There was nothing to be done. Hannah, his beautiful, laughing, bright-eyed Hannah, was gone.

“One day,” he whispered hoarsely, gathering her lifeless, bloody body in his arms. His tears dampened her hair and ran down her pale cheeks as he rocked back and forth. “One day, my love. One day.”

But there wasn’t going to be a one day for Hannah.

There wasn’t going to be any other days at all.

A DANGEROUS TEMPTATION

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